Indian word of the year 2025

ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

WHAT IS your enduring memory of the year, 2025? What is the word that will capture that memory? What is the word that impacted most people in India?

Short-lived words

An obvious candidate is *Sindoor*. According to the National Investigation Agency, the terror attack in Pahalgam was perpetrated by three Pakistani infiltrators and two Indian collaborators who gave them shelter. The response, Operation Sindoor, was a war of choice. The Indian Air Force, missiles and drones inflicted extensive damage on Pakistan's military infrastructure and, in turn, India suffered some loss (which is inevitable in a war). All three Pakistanis were killed in an encounter. Nothing is known yet of the two Indians arrested during the investigation. The lack of transparency about the outcomes still hangs over the war. *Operation Sindoor* lasted just four days, and was too short to leave a lasting impression.

Another candidate is *Tariff*. Beginning April 2, 2025, the word appeared in every conversation. There was only one rival word — Trump! Trump and tariffs unmade the economies of several countries, and there is no end yet. For example, the reciprocal tariffs and the penalty (for buying Russian oil) on Indian exports to the U.S. remain, severely affecting exports of steel, aluminum and copper, textiles, gem and jewellery, marine products and chemicals. Mr Piyush Goyal's promised bilateral trade agreement in the "near future" is as far away at the end of 2025 as it was in April, 2025.

GST is a strong contender. Eight years after the disastrous debut of GST, the central government lent a ear to good advice, and rationalised the rate structure and reduced the tax rates on a wide range of goods and services — yet the administrative harassment remains. Every body of traders has pointed out the nightmare of compliance with GST laws. Because the tax relief was too little compared to the size of retail consumption, the anticipated boost to consumption did not happen. Higher consumption was confined to the top deciles of the population.

Words that lost

An unfamiliar phrase — *Goldilocks year for the economy* — entered the conversation but vanished quickly. The literary allusion was unfamiliar to even educated people. Besides, the IMF questioned the credibility of India's national accounts. From the former chief economic adviser to professors to researchers, many spoke on the weaknesses of the economy. Ultimately, the clamour for jobs drowned out the officially sponsored celebration. Here is a sobering lesson: at current growth rates, the United States, China and India added in 2025 the following 'output' to their GDP (in constant USD):

COUNTRY	GROWTH RATE	OUTPUT ADDED IN 2025
China	4.8 per cent	USD 931 billion
U.S.	1.8	USD 551 billion
India	6.6	USD 276 billion

While China is *closing* the gap with the U.S. (the largest economy), the gap between India and China and between India and the U.S. is *widening*. There are many weaknesses in the Indian economy that the government refuses to acknowledge or, perhaps, even understand. *The Hindu* editorialised thus: 'The 50 per cent tariffs by the U.S. are still in place, private investment remains sluggish, foreign capital is pulling out of the country, the weakening rupee is making imports more expensive for an import-dependent economy, real wages are not growing fast enough, and consumer demand remains tepid'. The Goldilocks claim is hollow.

The once-upon-a-time commonly used word *Secular* has practically disappeared. It became the *non*-word of the year. Few people describe themselves proudly as secular. Editorial writers shun the word. Originally, secular meant separation of state and religion but, later, it acquired the meaning that a secular person's values are based on reason and humanism, not religious doctrine.

> The main culprits are the State, the leaders in pivotal positions, and some organisations that have been emboldened due to the patronage of the State

The shameful 'winner'

The retreat of secularism has given rise to *Hate*, a word condemned by every religion. Sadly, most examples of hate speech and hate writing are based on religion. Other spurs to hate are race, language and caste. The most evident hate is hate against Muslims, Muslim practices of dress and food, and Muslim places of worship. Muslim prayers are interrupted or restricted. The specious justification is that Muslims had invaded India and ruled over many parts of India for six centuries, and it is time for Hindus to show the Muslims their place. The other object of ire is the Christian community. Christian churches are vandalised, Christian priests and evangelists are killed, and Christian children singing carols are assaulted. All these in the name of asserting Hindu 'rights'. Nothing can be more abhorrent to the Constitution of India than the idea of Hindu supremacy. The idea of India is built on the cornerstone of *citizenship*, not religion or race or caste or language. The vast majority of the Indian people celebrate Dr Abdul Kalam and Mother Teresa but a small number spreads hate against Muslims and Christians.

The most worrying aspect is the attempt to sanitise or legitimise such illegal actions. The main culprits are the State, the leaders in pivotal positions, and some organisations that have been emboldened due to the patronage of the State. Their words, deeds or silence encourage the messengers of hate to commit depredations. This trend will splinter India and the inevitable will happen: an India that is broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.

For all these reasons, with profound shame and regret, I choose the word that defined India in 2025: *HATE*.

Year-end musings

FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

THE DEFINING political image for me of the year just ended is Narendra Modi striding into BJP headquarters after the Bihar victory, smiling triumphantly and waving a Bihari scarf over his head. What struck me was how much his body language had changed. Gone was the humility we saw after he failed to win a full majority in the Lok Sabha election in 2024. He had boasted of winning more than 400 seats and ended up without a simple majority. He managed to become Prime Minister for a third time, only with the help of allies. He appeared to sense that India's voters had sent him a message. They had. They saw him as a better man to lead India than Rahul Gandhi, but seemed to warn that the autocratic tendencies he showed in his first two terms was something they did not approve of. There was even an unsubtle dressing down from the head of the RSS.

So, Modi seemed to become a new, humbler man. Now the old Modi is back, with knobs on. For this, he has Rahul Gandhi to thank. After he was able to win enough seats for the Congress party to become Leader of the Opposition, there was a moment when it seemed that India would finally have an Opposition in Parliament that would act as a check on the government's power and enable parliamentary democracy to function as it should. It did not take long for that moment to turn into an illusion. The Congress party had a chance to rebuild its broken organisational infrastructure and emerge as a strong Opposition party, but it was a chance not taken. It remains a collection of courtiers and sycophants bowing and scraping at the feet of the Dynasty.

The BJP, for its part, did some necessary course correction after the Lok Sabha near defeat and went on to win Haryana, Delhi, Maharashtra and Bihar. After losing spectacularly in these major state elections, the courtiers in Delhi advised their Prince to blame it all on the Election Commission and on 'vote chori'. So, instead of real introspection, Rahul Gandhi spent his time steeped in piles of voters' lists, looking for what he called 'atom and hydrogen bombs'. He threatened that when he exploded these bombs, there would be nowhere for the Chief Election Commissioner to hide. In the 'H' bomb explosion, he produced evidence of a Brazilian model having voted in the Haryana election more than 20 times. In fairness, there is some evidence of inaccuracies in voters' lists, but not enough to steal a whole election.

In between his electoral 'bombs', the Leader of the Opposition made trips last year to Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Chile and Germany. Wherever he went, he told overseas Indians and sundry foreigners about the Indian Election Commission's 'cheating' ways and repeated that democracy was being destroyed in India. What is puzzling is why he needs to tell foreigners about this. If the situation is so dire, should he not spend more time in India?

There are serious problems here that we need an Opposition party to raise. In the past week, we have seen people die of contaminated water in Indore. This city is considered India's cleanest. Most of our other cities get listed among the dirtiest in the world and many are in states run by BJP governments. A valid question would be to ask why the vaunted 'double-engine governments' have proved so incompetent. The Prime Minister might sincerely believe that we are well on our way to become 'viksit' by 2047, but he seems not to have taken a road trip lately and noticed how bad our beloved Bharat Mata looks. Nor does he appear to have talked to businessmen to find out why private investment remains stagnant and why so many rich Indians (and poor) continue to flee to better countries.

We need an Opposition party that would speak up on these issues, and on the consistent and brutal attack on India's pluralist legacy by thugs who owe allegiance to the Sangh Parivar. The recent attacks on Christmas, Christians, Santa Claus and churches made international headlines. When they did, there was an attempt by Hindutva apologists to blame it all on 'fringe fanatics'. Not true. It was the Vishva Hindu Parishad who, in a written missive, warned Hindus not to celebrate Christmas and it was its youth wing, the Bajrang Dal, that deployed the stormtroopers who spread poison and hate on Christmas Day.

Hate speech has become so much a part of our 'culture' that it makes headlines only when Hindutva goons break into a young girl's private birthday party and start thrashing her Muslim friends. This happened in Bareilly some days ago. And why not, since the state of Uttar Pradesh is already a Hindu Rashtra ruled by a monk in saffron robes. Under that 'double-engine government', new highways and airports have indeed been built, but below the glittering surface lie layers and layers of destitution, deprivation and despair.

My wish for 2026 is that we somehow manage to get an Opposition party that will put the Modi government on the mat for its many failures on many, many fronts. But even as I write these words, I hear that Rahul Gandhi is off another trip to a foreign land. Why? What for? And for whom?

HOW TO RAISE A BOY
BY SWATI PRASAD

We quit social media, we found our way, our sons will too

I MET 21-YEAR-OLD Rohan (*name changed*) at my younger son's rock school recently. He had just completed college and stepped into the burgeoning gig economy — juggling writing assignments and performing at events with his bandmates. He explained how musicians today release albums on Spotify, becoming overnight sensations if their song "blows up".

A little later, my son's guitar teacher asked for my Instagram handle. Since my younger one isn't on Instagram, he wanted our accounts to tag his performance at the upcoming ensemble. As neither my husband nor I are on the platform, I shared my sister's handle — the same one the school has used over the past eight ensembles that my now 15-year-old son has taken part in.

My husband and I quit Facebook in 2014, when the boys were still under 10. Since then, as self-employed professionals, our social media presence has largely been limited to LinkedIn and WhatsApp to keep track of what's happening in our fields.

Our sons have grown up to be their own people, perhaps quite different from their peers. The older one loves growing vegetables, frequenting *gaushalas* and national parks, volunteering at animal rescue centres and caring for indie dogs on his university campus. The younger one is more obsessed with football and music.

They are digital natives, of course. They follow a few YouTubers and sometimes play games on their mobile phones. Like their peers, they are savvy with Gen Z lingo, memes and trends. But they have never opened Instagram, Snapchat or Facebook accounts. The younger one faced some peer pressure three years ago but doesn't feel the need anymore, because he occasionally gets a glimpse of what his peer group is doing through his friends' Instagram account.

Interestingly, both have struggled with their peers. They complain that many classmates don't wake up on time, follow influencers like Andrew Tate and watch content that unsettles them. Each of them manages these social dynamics in his own way — one more diplomatic, the other more direct.

Recently, a friend suggested that my sons should be on LinkedIn. The younger one could share videos of his musical performances, but he said he was not interested in "flexing". The older one could document his internships, research, and volunteer work — useful for jobs and, later, for postgraduate applications. I agreed. Because I follow his professors and the university on LinkedIn, I sometimes see how his classmates are polishing their profiles about volunteer activities. When I showed him a classmate's enthusiastic post, he shrugged and said volunteering was a "fancy word" for moving boxes around at the event.

Meanwhile, the older one's best friend is in town for winter break and he seems to know far more about what's going on in Delhi than we do, thanks to Instagram. After talking to him and Rohan, I realised just how much social media exposes young people to worlds we barely understand.

This made me wonder: Have I been fair to my sons? Perhaps they never felt the pull because their parents weren't scrolling endlessly. Maybe if they'd seen us on these platforms, they would have grown curious and opened accounts as teenagers. They're awkward with selfies and I often catch them exchanging looks of quiet disdain at people filming reels in public.

After staying away from social media for over a decade, I had, of late, begun nudging the older one to open a LinkedIn account. No one looks at CVs these days, I was told. But he showed no interest. "Fine, I'll do it if you really want me to," he said. "No," I replied. "Don't open it because I'm telling you to. Open one if you actually feel like it." In that moment, I realised — this isn't about the "need" to be on social media. It's about the comfort of not being on it. And I need to be comfortable with that.

Curating a digital self is not everyone's cup of tea. Universities and employers must know that. When we deleted our Facebook accounts, we didn't know that 11 years later, Australia would ban social media for children under 16, and New York would mandate prominent mental health warnings on social media platforms. We were just choosing a different path. These little decisions made us what we are today. We found our way; my sons will too.

The writer is a freelance journalist based in New Delhi
(How to Raise a Boy is a fortnightly column)

Night at Parliament: When an MP lived on campus to evade arrest

HISTORY HEADLINE
BY CHAKSHU ROY

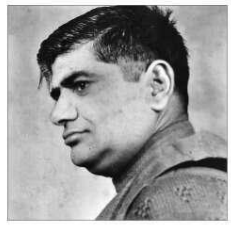
THE PAST year was one of late-night functioning of Parliament. In April, the Rajya Sabha stayed up until 4 am discussing the Waqf Amendment Bill and President's Rule in Manipur. In December 2025, the Lok Sabha wrapped up the G-RAM-G Bill discussions at 1 am. The Rajya Sabha then passed this new employment guarantee law at 2 am the next day.

The recently concluded Winter Session also saw Trinamool Congress's Rajya Sabha MPs hold an overnight protest in the Parliament complex. Prepared with warm clothing, sleeping bags and homemade food to face the Delhi winter, these MPs slept on the steps of the old Parliament building in protest against the government pushing the G-RAM-G Bill through the national legislature.

Late-night parliamentary sittings have a long history, with the most famous being the midnight session of August 14-15, 1947, when India marked its Independence. But perhaps the first time an MP stayed overnight in Parliament had nothing to do with a momentous occasion, discussing national issues or debating critical legislation — it was to avoid arrest by the police in 1964.

The MP was Mani Ram Bagri, 42, whom the voters of Hisar (now in Haryana) had elected to the Lok Sabha for the first time in 1962 on a Socialist Party ticket.

Bagri began his legislative journey as an MLA in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. A quick-witted orator, he was a passionate but disruptive parliamentarian. In his first parliamentary session, his obstruction of Lok Sabha proceedings resulted in his suspension from the House for seven days. In the next five years, he would disrupt the President's address, the Speaker would repeatedly



Mani Ram Bagri. WIKIPEDIA

ask him to leave the House and he would face a ban from proceedings for over 30 days. In a letter, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru referred to him as a "very troublesome person". And Bagri, in the heat of debate, once accused Nehru of speaking "like a dictator".

But Bagri also actively participated in Lok Sabha proceedings. In his first term, he asked the government 1,700 questions and intervened in House proceedings over 500 times. He raised a diverse range of issues, including labour, finance, foreign affairs, and national security, highlighting that he was an MP, not simply a representative of Hisar.

Bagri was also no stranger to the legal process. During his time as an MLA, one of his public speeches had led the Punjab government to initiate proceedings against him. After becoming an MP, he would participate in demonstrations in Delhi, including a few outside the PM's residence. And it was his participation in one of these *dharnas* in 1964 that led the authorities to initiate criminal proceedings against him.

Apprehending arrest, Bagri approached the Lok Sabha Speaker for protection. The Speaker consulted senior House leaders. He then allowed Bagri to remain on Parliament grounds but prohibited from entering the building after 7 pm. As long as he stayed on Parliament's grounds, the police could not arrest him.

This privilege of not being arrested on Parliament grounds was a result of legislative developments a decade earlier, which started in the Madras Legislative Assembly. A committee of this legislature, headed by PT Rajan, defined the precincts of their legislature. As a result, serving any legal processes to any MLA on the grounds of the Assembly became a breach of privilege.

In December 1955, the Lok Sabha's Rules Committee stated that the Parliament precincts were sacrosanct. Based on the panel's recommendation, the Lok Sabha added a rule to its procedures, stating that authorities not arrest anyone within the precincts of the House without the Speaker's permission.

So in April 1964, after the Speaker's permission, Bagri added to the architectural landscape of the Parliament House by pitching a tent on its lawns. Lok Sabha was in session and his tent, which had a table and a chair, was a crowd-puller. Since that April in Delhi was pleasant, Bagri also added a cot for a good night's sleep. Parliament also made arrangements for him to use the washroom and other facilities.

But Bagri pushed the envelope and tried to enter the building after 7 pm without the Speaker's permission. Parliament staff prevented his entry, which sparked a House debate over MPs' privileges and whether Parliament should offer sanctuary to members facing arrest. One of his colleagues would highlight that Bagri's tent was an example of Parliament's supremacy.

The Speaker would then define the extent of members' privileges in such cases and warn Bagri that the concession given to him could not continue indefinitely. Parliamentary debates suggest that Bagri took down his tent later that evening and left Parliament's grounds without getting arrested.

He would continue his demonstrations. And the authorities would learn from the experience of 1964. On August 16, 1965, the police arrested him after a car chase when he exited Parliament. Bagri would also go to jail during the Emergency and go on to win two more Lok Sabha polls.

The writer looks at issues through a legislative lens and works at PRS Legislative Research

Stop treating approval like oxygen, watch her grow

SHE SAID
BY TVARITA IYER VEMURI

THERE COMES a moment in every woman's life when she realises she has been living as the idea of a person, rather than the person herself. It doesn't arrive with a dramatic thunderbolt or an epiphany worthy of a diary entry. It arrives quietly, like noticing a perfume you don't remember choosing still lingering on your skin. You weren't wearing it for yourself but because someone once told you it suited you.

Women are handed roles as if they are birthrights: she's the sensible one, the calm one, the girl who doesn't make trouble. And because girls are raised to treat approval like oxygen, we inhale these descriptions until they feel like identity. Psychology calls this introjection, the absorption of expectations so deeply that they become indistinguishable from the self. But to the women living it, it feels like decorum, upbringing, culture and like we're doing the right thing.

Somewhere along the way, we become fluent in being the version of ourselves that pleases the room. The nervous system learns that safety comes from being agreeable. The mind learns that love often follows compliance. The body learns to tense whenever an honest feeling wants to surface. By adulthood, many women become emotional contortionists to fit everyone else's comfort, even if it leaves them breathless.

Then something shifts. Maybe she moves out or falls in love with someone who sees her beneath the performance or leaves a relationship that demanded too much silence or she simply reached an age where pretending feels heavier than the truth. Whatever the trigger, her inner world becomes louder than the expectations around her. Suddenly, she realises she has no idea what she actually likes, wants or believes. This isn't an identity crisis but an identity reveal.

As she starts noticing her own patterns with honest eyes, she sees the pauses before saying no, the softened tone to avoid conflict, the rehearsed opinions that are swallowed when the moment arrives and the guilt that rises whenever she chooses herself — a guilt inherited from generations of women rewarded for shrinking. When she questions these patterns, her nervous system trembles because she's been trained otherwise.

And yet she continues. She answers questions without scanning for approval. She hears and recognises her own laughter. She admits the desires she had convinced herself were silly. She explores the anger stored in her mind's attic, packed beneath layers labelled "good girl expectations". Slowly, she begins to reacquaint herself with a version of womanhood that isn't curated by others.

This psychological transformation is fascinating. The nervous system rewrites old scripts, the inner child learns to feel safe with self-expression and a lifetime of emotional labour is replaced by emotional honesty. Beneath it all lies grief — over the years she spent performing, the passions she postponed and the voice she muted.

Grief in such journeys is not tragic but the making of space. She is surprised to discover that her real self is not too much, just fuller than the version the world preferred. She realises she doesn't want a life that looks good from the outside but one that feels good from the inside. She begins to value peace over politeness, truth over tolerance and presence over performance.

Somewhere along this unfolding, she reaches an almost cinematic moment. She meets herself. A self that feels both new and deeply familiar. Maybe that is the secret of womanhood that nobody teaches us. Becoming yourself isn't a grand transformation but a quiet reunion with the person you were before the world edited you. And perhaps the most beautiful part is this. A woman doesn't truly discover herself when life finally gives her permission. She discovers herself the moment she stops waiting for it.

The writer is a Delhi-based child and systemic psychologist
Editor (Planning, Projects) Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column

MADURO CAPTURED, POWER VACUUM IN VENEZUELA; COUNTRY'S VICE-PRESIDENT IS IN RUSSIA

A brilliant operation: Trump

Associated Press
Washington, January 3

WITH THE capture of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro, President Donald Trump and his allies are calling the audacious military operation a major success as the US leader once again demonstrated a willingness to use forces for risky missions that come with a potential big payoff.

The operation has ousted a South American strongman blasted by Trump's administration as an "illegitimate" dictator and a "narco-terrorist," a scourge responsible for a steady of stream of illegal drugs poisoning US and Europe.

"It was a brilliant operation, actually," Trump told *The New York Times* shortly after US forces were cleared from Venezuelan airspace.

But the path ahead could certainly be treacherous as the White House faces a series of difficult questions. The operation to remove Maduro certainly marks another big moment for Trump's foreign policy in his second term, as he hasn't shied away from flexing US military might even as he has vowed to keep America out of war.

POTENTIAL POWER VACUUM

It is unclear how Trump plans to oversee Venezuela. Despite a dramatic overnight operation that knocked out electricity in part of Caracas and captured Maduro in or near one of his safe houses, US forces have no control over the country itself, and Maduro's government appears to still be in charge.

The removal of Maduro, who led Venezuela with a heavy hand for more than 12 years, potentially opens a power vacuum in the Latin American country. Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodriguez — Maduro's presumptive successor — is in Russia, four sources familiar with her movements said.

Any serious destabilization in the nation of 28 million people threatens to hand Trump the type of quagmire that has marked US foreign policy for much of the 21st century, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq - which were also premised on regime change.

WITH REUTERS INPUTS

Government supporters display posters of President Nicolas Maduro and former President Hugo Chávez in downtown Caracas on Saturday. REUTERS

Months of US military force buildup preceded operation against Maduro

The New York Times
January 3

BEFORE PRESIDENT Trump announced on Saturday that the United States had captured President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, the US military had launched one of the largest deployments of its forces to the Caribbean region in decades.

The United States Southern Command said that about 15,000 troops were in the region by December.

President Trump described them as a "massive armada." In August, he had secretly signed a directive to the Pentagon to begin using military force against Latin American drug cartels his administration had deemed terrorist organizations.

Since the signing, the United States had carried out 35 lethal strikes on boats that the administration said were carrying narcotics.

The attacks have killed more than 100 people. Legal and military experts questioned the legality of the strikes. Congress has not authorized them, nor has it declared war on Venezuela.

Some Trump officials have said that the main goal of the increase in troops was to drive Maduro, Venezuela's authoritarian leader, from power. Hours before Trump announced the capture of Maduro and his wife, the Venezuelan government accused the US military of carrying out attacks in the capital, Caracas, and other parts of the country.

In recent months, the US military buildup has included transport and cargo planes. Flight-tracking data reviewed by The New York Times showed C-17 heavy-lift cargo planes, largely used for transporting military troops and equipment, conducted at least 16 flights to Puerto Rico from American military bases.

The C-17s flew to Puerto Rico from bases in New Mexico, Illinois, Vermont, Florida, Arizona, Utah, Washington State and Japan. The United States has also recently moved special-operations aircraft to the Caribbean.

Since October, the US forces have included a Navy expeditionary strike group consisting of amphibious warships carrying thousands of Marines, along with warplanes, attack helicopters and other aircraft. NYT

Maduro's rise to power: From a bus driver to Venezuela's President

Reuters
January 3

NICOLÁS MADURO is the president of Venezuela. US President Donald Trump said Maduro had been captured by US forces on Saturday, a claim that has thrust Venezuela's crisis into a new, uncertain phase.

Born into a working-class family on November 23, 1962, Maduro is the son of a trade-union leader. He worked as a bus driver and began his political life as a trade-union activist for metro workers. He campaigned for Hugo Chávez after a failed 1992 coup and visited Chávez in prison.

Maduro won a seat in the legislature after Chávez's 1998 election. He rose through the ranks, becoming president of the National Assembly and later serving six years as foreign minister. Chávez named him his chosen successor.

When Chávez died in 2013, Maduro became acting president on March 8 and was narrowly elected later that month.

His government continued Chávez's leftist, state-led policies, including nationalisations and close ties with allies such as Cuba, Russia and China.

Maduro had been in power since 2013. AP

His time in office has been marked by severe economic collapse. Hyperinflation, chronic shortages of food and medicine, and mass emigration have defined daily life for many Venezuelans. The government has blamed hoarding and "speculative attacks," while critics point to mismanagement and tight state control. Maduro's rule has also been marred by accusations of democratic backsliding. The 2024 vote and his inauguration for a third term in January 2025 were widely condemned by observers and the opposition.

• US interventions in Latin America, Caribbean

Cuba (1898): The Spanish-American War in 1898 led to a number of US interventions in Central America, particularly in Cuba.

Nicaragua (1912): Nicaragua was in the middle of a revolt against its right-leaning and pro-American president when Marines landed in the country on a stated mission to preserve US interests.

Mexico (1914): Tensions were high between the United States and Mexico in 1914. The year before, the US had worked to overthrow a Mexican president in favour of another who was viewed as more pro-American.

Haiti (1915): After President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam of Haiti was assassinated, Woodrow Wilson sent Marines to the country. The mission was to restore order and stabilize Haiti's turbulence.

Chile (1973): After democratic election of President Salvador Allende in 1970, an economic war ordered by President Richard Nixon caused the 1973 Chilean coup d'état with the involvement of the CIA due to Allende's democratic socialist leanings.

Grenada (1983): US accused the Grenada government of building an airport that would project Soviet power in the region, claiming that the long runway could enable Soviet Union to land giant planes capable of moving weapons.

Panama (1989): General Manuel Noriega, the military leader of Panama, had longstanding ties with George HW Bush. The US paid General Noriega to help sabotage the left-wing Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the FMLN revolutionaries in El Salvador. NYT

• BRIEFLY

A currency exchange employee counts newly issued Syrian pound banknotes in Damascus on Saturday. AP

SYRIA

Govt begins circulating new post-Assad currency bills

SYRIA STARTED the process of circulating new currency bills on Saturday as the crisis-hit nation seeks to stabilise the economy as it recovers from the fall of Bashar Assad's government. A decree issued earlier this week by President Ahmad al-Sharaa said that "old Syrian currency" will be gradually withdrawn from circulation according to a timetable set by the central bank and through designated exchange centres. Central Bank Governor Mokhles Nazer posted on X that after months of preparations, the exchange of old Syrian pounds with new banknotes officially began Saturday morning. REUTERS

CHINA

Ireland PM set to visit China today, first time in 14 yrs

IRELAND'S PRIME Minister Micheal Martin will visit China from Sunday and meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping in the first visit by an Irish leader in 14 years, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced on Saturday. Beijing has been strengthening ties with individual members of the European Union despite tensions with the EU bloc. AP

BRAZIL

11 killed as bus crashes head-on into truck

A HEAD-ON collision between a bus and a truck left at least 11 people dead on Friday in southern Brazil, the country's Federal Highway police said in a statement. Another seven people were injured in the accident, which took place on a federal highway in Rio Grande do Sul around 11:30 am local time, and were sent to hospitals, the police said. REUTERS

• NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

BANGLADESH

13 NCP leaders resign over ties with Jamaat

THIRTEEN CENTRAL leaders of the student-led National Citizen Party (NCP) have resigned in the last eight days over its alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami ahead of elections in Bangladesh in February, a report said. Apart from alliance with Jamaat, leaders also raised several common allegations against NCP, including a lack of transparency in decision-making and political compromise, Bangladesh's web portal *The Business Standard* reported on Saturday. PTI

PAKISTAN

PAF carries out flight test of Taimoor missile

PAKISTAN AIR Force has successfully conducted a flight test of the developed Taimoor Weapon System, capable of hitting targets at 600 kilometres, it was announced on Saturday. This launch marks another significant milestone in the advancement of national aerospace and defence capabilities, the army said in a statement. "Taimoor Air-Launched Cruise Missile is capable of engaging enemy targets with high precision at a range of 600 kilometers," it said. PTI

Rioters must be put in their place, says Iran leader; protest death toll 10

Associated Press
Dubai, January 3

IRAN'S SUPREME leader insisted Saturday that "rioters must be put in their place" after a week of protests that have shaken the Islamic Republic, likely giving security forces a green light to aggressively put down the demonstrations.

The first comments by 86-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei come as violence surrounding the demonstrations sparked by Iran's ailing economy has killed at least 10 people.

The protests show no sign of stopping and follow US President Donald Trump's warning to Iran on Friday that if Tehran "violently kills peaceful protesters," the United States "will come to their rescue."

While it remains unclear how and if Trump will intervene, his comments sparked an immediate, angry response, with officials within the theocracy threatening to target American troops in the Mideast.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during a meeting in Tehran on Saturday. REUTERS

They also take on new importance after Trump said Saturday that the US military captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, a longtime ally of Tehran.

The protests have become the biggest in Iran since 2022, when the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in police custody triggered nationwide demonstrations. However, the protests have yet to be as widespread and intense as those surrounding the death of Amini, who was detained over not wearing her hijab, or headscarf, to the liking of authorities.

State television aired remarks by Khamenei to an audience in Tehran that sought to separate the concerns of protesting Iranians upset about the rial's collapse from "rioters."

"We talk to protesters, the officials must talk to them. But there is no benefit to talking to rioters. Rioters must be put in their place," Khamenei said

He also reiterated a claim constantly made by officials in Iran that foreign powers like Israel or the United States were pushing the protests, without offering any evidence.

Three days after being hacked, set on fire, Hindu businessman dies in Dhaka

Press Trust of India
Dhaka, New Delhi, Jan 3

A HINDU businessman, who was brutally attacked, hacked and set on fire three days ago, died on Saturday in Bangladesh, reports and minority faith group leader said.

Khokon Chandra Das, 50, is the fifth person from the Hindu community to be killed since December and radical groups in Bangladesh are visibly trying to intimidate the minority faiths, Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council spokesman Kajol Debnath said.

Das, who ran a medical shop and mobile banking business, was intercepted and hacked when he was returning home after closing his shop near Keruhbanga Bazar in Damudya in Shariatpur district, about 100 km south of Dhaka, Wednesday night. According to media reports Thursday, the attackers poured petrol on his head before setting him on fire. "Das died this morning after battling for for three days," Debnath confirmed.

As the attackers fled the scene, Das, who was on fire, jumped into a roadside pond as locals raised an alarm. Police said he was rescued by locals, taken to Shariatpur Sadar Hospital, and then referred to Dhaka due to the severity of his injuries.

Doctors said Das suffered multiple injuries across his body, including a serious wound to his abdomen, along with burn injuries on his face, head and hands.

"This is the fifth death of a Hindu man in one month (December). During the month we recorded seven attacks on the community," Debnath said.

Military-backed party leads early election results in Myanmar

Associated Press
Bangkok, January 3

MYANMAR'S MILITARY-appointed election body has begun announcing the winners of the first phase of its three-part general election, saying that the military-backed party has won the majority of seats, as widely expected.

Critics of the current system say that the election is designed to add a facade of legitimacy to the status quo. They charge the polls are neither free nor fair because of the exclusion of major parties and government repression of dissenters.

The military government said that more than 6 million people, about 52 per cent of the 11 million eligible voters cast ballots in the first phase of polls.

Swiss prosecutors probe pair who ran bar over deadly blaze

Reuters
Crans-Montana, January 3

TWO PEOPLE who ran a Swiss barthat burst into flames during a New Year's Eve party, killing 40, are under criminal investigation on suspicion of offences including homicide by negligence, prosecutors said Saturday.

Two days after the fire, in which 119 people suffered injuries including severe burns, officials were still trying to identify many of those killed and attention turned to how one of Switzerland's worst tragedies could have occurred.

The bar's two operators are suspected of offences including homicide by negligence, causing bodily harm by negligence and arson by negligence, prosecutors in Valais, the canton that is home to the bar in the upscale ski resort of Crans-Montana, said in a statement. They did not name the pair.

"It was an enormous tragedy. We're all so sorry that this had to happen," Swiss Justice Minister Beat Jans told reporters, standing in front of the cordoned-off bar, Le Constellation.

Reuters was not immediately able to contact the bar's owners for comment or reach the prosecutors to verify whether they were the people referred to.

• SCIENTISTS TOOK SAMPLES FROM WHALE BLOW, IDENTIFYING POSSIBLE DISEASE RISKS FOR MARINE MAMMALS IN NORTHERN SEAS

In the Arctic, drones help scientists in identifying deadly virus in whales

Alexa Robles-Gil
January 3

IN NORTHERN Norway, scientists detected a disease-causing virus in humpback whales by flying drones over them. It is the first time the virus, known as cetacean morbillivirus, has been identified in Arctic waters.

Using drones to collect samples from whale blow, scientists tested for four different viruses. The findings, published in mid-December in the journal BMC Veterinary Research, showed that cetacean morbillivirus, a highly infectious and deadly virus, is circulating in northern ecosystems.

"It has never been reported in that area before," said Helena Costa, a veterinarian at Nord University, who led the study. "We kind of expected that some of the species that migrate would bring it in."

Cetacean morbillivirus is highly infectious in porpoises, dolphins, whales and other marine mammals. It has caused several outbreaks worldwide, particularly in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, affecting the respiratory and neurological systems and leading to mass strandings and deaths.

The virus is transmitted through direct contact between marine mammals and through respiratory droplets and is not necessarily fatal; some infected animals exhibit no symptoms.

Despite its prevalence elsewhere in the world, the virus had not been previously detected in the Arctic Circle. The lack of reported cases in the region may reflect gaps in surveillance rather than the true absence of the virus, the study suggested.

To determine whether the virus was traveling so far north, Costa and her colleagues used drones to collect samples of "whale blow," the air expelled through the animal's blowhole. Traditionally, scientists take skin biopsies, leaving a small wound on the animal, to test for different hormones, pathogens or pollutants. Drones offer a less invasive sampling method and have proved incredibly useful in studying whales.

Scientists flew drones with petri dishes to collect samples of whale blow which they tested for four different viruses. NYT

"It's a little bit crazy that you can collect air from a whale and actually detect something," Costa said.

Between 2016 and 2025, scientists collected more than 50 blow samples from humpback, sperm and fin whales. Drones equipped with petri dishes were flown above and behind the whales' blowholes to collect samples. Following humpback whale migration patterns, the researchers collected samples from whale groups in northern Norway, Iceland and Cape Verde off the coast of West Africa.

Besides cetacean morbillivirus, scientists tested for three other pathogens: H5N1, the bird flu virus; herpesvirus; and a bacterium called brucella. Two of these, bird flu and brucella, can also infect humans. Costa and her colleagues wanted to determine whether these two pathogens were present in northern Norway, where people can swim with whales and would be at risk.

Neither pathogen was found in the samples.

With more data, especially over time, researchers might begin to identify patterns of disease transmission, Costa said.

"The interesting thing would be to see it in the long term," she said. "You get the most valuable data when you have decades of research."

Whales are more difficult to study and to sample than other animals in northern ecosystems, and so they have not been as well represented in research.

"This is a pioneering contribution," said Patricia Arranz Alonso, a marine biologist at University of La Laguna in Spain who was not involved in the research. The findings represent the beginning of a global initiative to monitor pathogens in wild cetacean populations, she said, and the use of drones is a vital advance.

Costa, who hopes to continue studying disease risk for other whales in the region, agreed. Noninvasive methods open up "a new era of research for whales," she said. NYT

Opinion

SUNDAY, JANUARY 4, 2026

The most optimistic swing of the year

FAIRWAY FILES

Rahil Gangjee

THERE IS A very special time in a golfer's calendar when handicaps don't exist, slices are forgotten, and optimism flows like free beer at a clubhouse prize-giving. It's called January.

January is when golfers across the world wake up convinced that *this* is the year. The year they finally "fix the swing," get "mentally stronger," and—my personal favourite—"play smarter golf." This is also the month when credit cards take a beating from coaches, launch monitors, fitness trainers, yoga instructors, and gadgets that promise five extra yards and a life-changing ball flight.

I've been around long enough to know this ritual well. I've made these resolutions. Broken them. Rewritten them. And then blamed my equipment.

New Year's resolutions and golfers have a complicated relationship. We approach them with the same enthusiasm as a downhill par-5 and abandon them with the same speed as a bad bunker lie.

Resolution No. 1: I will practice more

This is the undisputed world champion of golf resolutions. "I'll practise three times a week." "I'll spend more time on my short game." "I'll actually work on my weaknesses."

January rolls in and the range is packed. People are hitting balls with purpose. Alignment sticks are out. Someone is even working on putting instead of smashing drivers like they're auditioning for a long-drive contest.

By February, reality steps in. Work gets busy. Traffic gets worse. The weather gets hotter. Suddenly "three times a week" becomes "weekends only," which then becomes "I'll play instead—it's still golf, no?"

By March, practice is something you talk about, not something you do.

Let me let you in on a secret from the "old guy" corner: it's not about practising *more*. It's about practising *better*. Thirty focused minutes beats two hours of beating balls while discussing mutual fund returns with your playing partner.

But "I'll practise smarter" doesn't sound as heroic on January 1st.

Resolution No. 2: I will get fit for golf

This one usually follows a December full of weddings, holidays, and questionable food choices.

"I'm starting gym from Jan 2."

"I need more core strength."

"Flexibility is key."

Absolutely true. Golf fitness matters. I've learnt that the hard way, over many years and a few injuries I'd rather not relive.

But here's the pattern: January gym selfies. February mild soreness. March—back to "golf fitness means walking 18 holes, right?"

Fitness for golf doesn't mean looking like a fitness model. It means being able to swing repeatedly without pain, fatigue, or the need for painkillers before the back nine. Consistency again beats intensity.

You don't need a six-pack. You need a body that doesn't revolt on the 15th hole.

Resolution No. 3: I will fix my swing

Ah yes. The most dangerous resolution of them all.

January is when YouTube coaches get rich, slow-motion videos are analysed frame by frame, and everyone suddenly knows what "shallowing the club" means—without actually being able to do it.

Golfers convince themselves that one swing thought, one drill, one magical position will unlock scratch golf. What they forget is that the swing they're trying to fix has been yours for 20 years. It has muscle memory, emotional attachment, and a very strong will to survive.

Don't get me wrong—working on your swing is important. But chasing perfection is the fastest way to forget how to play golf. The swing is a means, not the destination.

Some of the best golf I've played has come when I stopped trying to look good and started trying to score. Ugly swings win tournaments. Ask history.

Resolution No. 4: I will control my temper

This one deserves a standing ovation—for ambition alone.

Every January, golfers promise:

"No more throwing clubs."

"No more abusing myself."

"I'll stay calm."

This resolution usually lasts exactly one double bogey.

Golf is a brutal mirror. It exposes impatience, ego, insecurity, and unrealistic expectations—often all in the same hole. Expecting to suddenly become Zen-like because the calendar changed is optimistic at best. The real resolution should be: *I'll recover faster.*

You're allowed to be upset. You're human. Just don't let one bad shot become three bad holes. Emotional recovery is the most underrated skill in golf—and life.

Trust me, I've seen grown men argue with golf balls as if they'll apologise and roll back into position. They never do.

Resolution No. 5: I will play smarter golf

Now we're talking. This is the only resolution I wish more golfers actually stuck to.

Smarter golf doesn't mean shorter golf. It means understanding *your* game. Knowing when to attack and when to accept par (or bogey) and move on. It means choosing clubs based on probability, not pride.

You don't need to hit driver on every hole just because it's legal. You don't need to go for every flag just because you once pulled it off in 2014. Golf rewards honesty. Brutal honesty.

My personal resolution (every year)

After decades in this game, my New Year resolution is always the same—and it has nothing to do with score.

I want to enjoy golf more.

Enjoy the walk. Enjoy the good shots. Laugh at the bad ones. Appreciate the fact that I still get to play this ridiculous, beautiful, infuriating game.

Scores come and go. Swings change. Bodies age. But the joy of a flushed iron, a holed putt, or a well-fought par—that's timeless. So this January, make your resolutions. Dream big. Book that lesson. Buy that gadget (we all will anyway).

Just remember: golf isn't a problem to be solved. It's an experience to be lived. And if your resolutions fall apart by February?

Welcome to the club. We meet every weekend.

Before I sign off, wishing all of you a very Happy New Year. May 2026 bring straighter drives, shorter putts, longer patience, and a handicap that moves in only one direction—preferably down.

And if it doesn't, may your excuses improve dramatically. See you on the tee!

Rahil Gangjee is a professional golfer, sharing through this column what life on a golf course is like

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram

Protest against the Karnataka Hate Speech and Hate Crimes (Prevention) Bill, 2025

The main culprits are the State, the leaders in pivotal positions, and some organisations that have been emboldened due to the patronage of the State

Indian word of the year 2025

WHAT IS YOUR enduring memory of the year, 2025? What is the word that will capture that memory? What is the word that impacted most people in India?

Short-lived words

An obvious candidate is *Sindoor*. According to the National Investigation Agency, the terror attack in Pahalgam was perpetrated by three Pakistani infiltrators and two Indian collaborators who gave them shelter. The response, Operation Sindoor, was a war of choice. The Indian Air Force, missiles and drones inflicted extensive damage on Pakistan's military infrastructure and, in turn, India suffered some loss (which is inevitable in a war). All three Pakistanis were killed in an encounter. Nothing is known yet of the two Indians arrested during the investigation. The lack of transparency about the outcomes still hangs over the war. *Operation Sindoor* lasted just four days, and was too short to leave a lasting impression.

Another candidate is *Tariff*. Beginning April 2, 2025, the word appeared in every conversation. There was only one rival word — Trump! Trump and tariffs unmade the economies of several countries, and there is no end yet. For example, the reciprocal tariffs and the penalty (for buying Russian oil) on Indian exports to the US remain, severely affecting exports of steel, aluminum and copper, textiles, gem and jewellery, marine products and chemicals. Mr Piyush Goyal's promised bilateral trade agreement in the "near future" is as far away at the end of 2025 as it was in April, 2025.

GST is a strong contender. Eight years after the disastrous debut of GST, the central government lent a ear to good advice, and rationalised the rate structure and reduced the tax rates on a wide range of goods and services — yet the administrative harassment remains. Every body of traders has pointed out the nightmare of compliance with GST laws. Because the tax relief was too little compared to the size of retail consumption, the anticipated boost to consumption did not happen. Higher consumption was confined to the top deciles of the population.

Words that lost

An unfamiliar phrase — *Goldilocks year for the economy* — entered the conversation but vanished quickly. The literary allusion was unfamiliar to even educated people. Besides, the IMF questioned the credibility of India's national accounts. From the former chief economic adviser to professors to researchers, many spoke on the weaknesses of the economy. Ultimately, the clamour for jobs drowned out the officially sponsored celebration. Here is a sobering lesson: at current growth rates, the United States, China and India added in 2025 the following 'output' to their GDP (in constant USD):

Country	Growth rate (%)	Output added in 2025 ($ bn)
China	4.8	931
US	1.8	551
India	6.6	276

While China is *closing* the gap with the US (the largest economy), the gap between India and China and between India and the US is *widening*. There are many weaknesses in the Indian economy that the government refuses to acknowledge or, perhaps, even understand. *The Hindu* editorialised thus: 'The 50 per cent tariffs by the US are still in place, private investment remains sluggish, foreign capital is pulling out of the country, the weakening rupee is making imports more expensive for an import-dependent economy, real wages are not growing fast enough, and consumer demand remains tepid'. The Goldilocks claim is hollow.

The once-upon-a-time commonly used word *Secular* has practically disappeared. It became the *non*-word of the year. Few people describe themselves proudly as secular. Editorial writers shun the word. Originally, secular meant separation of state and religion but, later, it acquired the meaning that a secular person's values are based on reason and humanism, not religious doctrine

The shameful 'winner'

The retreat of secularism has given rise to *Hate*, a word condemned by every religion. Sadly, most examples of hate speech and hate writing are based on religion. Other spurs to hate are race, language and caste. The most evident hate is hate against Muslims, Muslim practices of dress and food, and Muslim places of worship. Muslim prayers are interrupted or restricted. The specious justification is that Muslims had invaded India and ruled over many parts of India for six centuries, and it is time for Hindus to show the Muslims their place. The other object of ire is the Christian community. Christian churches are vandalised, Christian priests and evangelists are killed, and Christian children singing carols are assaulted. All these in the name of asserting Hindu 'rights'. Nothing can be more abhorrent to the Constitution of India than the idea of Hindu supremacy. The idea of India is built on the cornerstone of *citizenship*, not religion or race or caste or language. The vast majority of the Indian people celebrate Dr Abdul Kalam and Mother Teresa but a small number spreads hate against Muslims and Christians.

The most worrying aspect is the attempt to sanitise or legitimise such illegal actions. The main culprits are the State, the leaders in pivotal positions, and some organisations that have been emboldened due to the patronage of the State. Their words, deeds or silence encourage the messengers of hate to commit depredations. This trend will splinter India and the inevitable will happen: an India that is broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.

For all these reasons, with profound shame and regret, I choose the word that defined India in 2025: *HATE*.

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FIFTH COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Year-end musings

THE DEFINING POLITICAL image for me of the year just ended is Narendra Modi striding into BJP headquarters after the Bihar victory, smiling triumphantly and waving a Bihari scarf over his head. What struck me was how much his body language had changed. Gone was the humility we saw after he failed to win a full majority in the Lok Sabha election in 2024. He had boasted of winning more than 400 seats and ended up without a simple majority. He managed to become Prime Minister for a third time, only with the help of allies. He appeared to sense that India's voters had sent him a message. They had. They saw him as a better man to lead India than Rahul Gandhi, but seemed to warn that the autocratic tendencies he showed in his first two terms was something they did not approve of. There was even an unsubtle dressing down from the head of the RSS.

So, Modi seemed to become a new, humbler man. Now the old Modi is back, with knobs on. For this, he has Rahul Gandhi to thank. After he was able to win enough seats for the Congress party to become Leader of the Opposition, there was a moment when it seemed that India would finally have an Opposition in Parliament that would act as a check on the government's power and enable parliamentary democracy to function as it should. It did not take long for that moment to turn into an illusion. The Congress party had a chance to rebuild its broken organisational infrastructure and emerge as a strong Opposition party, but it was a chance not taken. It remains a collection of courtiers and sycophants bowing and scraping at the feet of the Dynasty.

The BJP, for its part, did some necessary course correction after the Lok Sabha near defeat and went on to win Haryana, Delhi, Maharashtra and Bihar. After losing spectacularly in these major state elections, the courtiers in Delhi advised their Prince to blame it all on the Election Commission and on 'vote chori'. So, instead of real introspection, Rahul Gandhi spent his time steeped in piles of voters' lists, looking for what he called 'atom and hydrogen bombs'. He threatened that when he exploded these bombs, there would be nowhere for the Chief Election Commissioner to hide. In the 'H' bomb explosion, he produced evidence of a Brazilian model having voted in the Haryana election more than 20 times. In fairness, there is some evidence of inaccuracies in voters' lists, but not enough to steal a whole election.

In between his electoral 'bombs', the Leader of the Opposition made trips last year to Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Chile and Germany. Wherever he went, he told overseas Indians and sundry foreigners about the Indian Election Commission's 'cheating' ways and repeated that democracy was being destroyed in India. What is puzzling is why he needs to tell foreigners about this. If the situation is so dire, should he not spend more time in India?

There are serious problems here that we need an Opposition party to raise. In the past week, we have seen people die of contaminated water in Indore. This city is considered India's cleanest. Most of our other cities get listed among the dirtiest in the world and many are in states run by BJP governments. A valid question would be to ask why the vaunted 'double-engine governments' have proved so incompetent. The Prime Minister might sincerely believe that we are well on our way to become 'viksit' by 2047, but he seems not to have taken a road trip lately and noticed how bad our beloved Bharat Mata looks. Nor does he appear to have talked to businessmen to find out why private investment remains stagnant and why so many rich Indians (and poor) continue to flee to better countries.

We need an Opposition party that would speak up on these issues, and on the consistent and brutal attack on India's pluralist legacy by thugs who owe allegiance to the Sangh Parivar. The recent attacks on Christmas, Christians, Santa Claus and churches made international headlines. When they did, there was an attempt by Hindutva apologists to blame it all on 'fringe fanatics'. Not true. It was the Vishva Hindu Parishad who, in a written missive, warned Hindus not to celebrate Christmas and it was its youth wing, the Bajrang Dal, that deployed the stormtroopers who spread poison and hate on Christmas Day.

Hate speech has become so much a part of our 'culture' that it makes headlines only when Hindutva goons break into a young girl's private birthday party and start thrashing her Muslim friends. This happened in Bareilly some days ago. And why not, since the state of Uttar Pradesh is already a Hindu Rashtra ruled by a monk in saffron robes. Under that 'double-engine government', new highways and airports have indeed been built, but below the glittering surface lie layers and layers of destitution, deprivation and despair.

My wish for 2026 is that we somehow manage to get an Opposition party that will put the Modi government on the mat for its many failures on many, many fronts. But even as I write these words, I hear that Rahul Gandhi is off another trip to a foreign land. Why? What for? And for whom?

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The New National Education Policy

The decision to make India's education policy employment-oriented was made with the announcement of the National Education Policy 2020. Now, the National Education Policy 2025 has arrived. While this education policy is an extension of the 2020 policy, it also incorporates the advancements in digital technology, artificial intelligence, and robotics that have taken place in India over the past five years, and aims to educate and raise awareness among the new generation about these advancements. We are not only dreaming of making our country a fully developed nation by 2047, but we also envision that by then, India will leapfrog from being the world's third-largest economic power to the first, surpassing the two powers ahead of it, namely the United States and China. However, for this to happen, it is crucial to fully educate India's young population, which is the largest in any country, and to keep them abreast of the changing times.

To achieve this goal, the Indian government has made the country's education policy skill-oriented and employment-focused, and is now emphasizing the development of an inclusive education system. An inclusive system means that you don't become confined to a single stream of knowledge, but rather expand it completely, encompassing knowledge dissemination, technological development, and every new innovation in your field. The goal is that students should not only rely on theoretical knowledge but also acquire practical skills. Technological innovation has taken hold in this country. Currently, at least 1.9 million students across the country are benefiting from it.

When revolutionary changes are occurring in the country due to the use of AI, it should also be included in the field of education. The new year 2026 has begun; now, positive changes based on the 2025 National Education Policy should be implemented rapidly. For this, first, teachers must be committed to this new awakening. After that, students must be prepared for it. Undoubtedly, India has consistently increased its allocation for the development of education.

In 2019-20, it was Rs. 94,854 crore, and today it has reached Rs. 1,28,650 crore. However, it is worth noting that the erstwhile Planning Commission and now NITI Aayog have consistently stated that at least 6 percent of our country's Gross Domestic Product should be spent on the development of education.

We have celebrated the Amrit Mahotsav of Independence, but we have never been able to spend this much on the development of education. Currently, there are 14.71 lakh schools in our country, and the number of teachers is 1.01 crore. The number of students studying in these schools is 24.69 crore. The goal is to increase the current 28.4 percent of students pursuing higher education to at least 50.1 percent. The number of higher education institutions in the country is also gradually increasing.

Currently, there are 520,81 colleges in our country, and the total number of all types of higher education institutions is 70,018. With the entry of the private sector into the field of education, the number of universities has increased to 1338. But the irony is that among the students who study in these institutions, the number of dropouts is also very high. Nowadays, young people are increasingly flocking to IELTS academies to achieve the required band scores so that they can go abroad and escape poverty. It is clear, and the statistics show, that if the country is to move towards a knowledge-based economy, then not only should the number of educational institutions and teachers increase, but students should also be guaranteed suitable employment in their own country so that they can seriously focus on this new education.

-Abhishek Vij

After Vande Bharat, Hopes for the Bullet Train to Run

Announcements about revolutionizing the Indian Railways have been made for a long time. Now, India's Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has announced on the very first day of 2026 that bullet trains will start running in our country from August 15, 2027. In the first phase, this bullet train will run between Surat and Vapi. After this, the first bullet train is announced to run from Ahmedabad to Mumbai. The distance between these two metro cities is 508 kilometers, which will be covered in 2 hours and 17 minutes. Before this, additional high-speed trains have already started running in the country's important cities, but the trial of the Vande Bharat sleeper train has also been completed. This sleeper train will be run between Guwahati and Kolkata from January 18-19. In this trial run, the train will have 16 coaches which will run at a speed of 180 kilometers per hour. The fare for the second AC sleeper between Guwahati and Howrah could be Rs. 2700, while traveling by air costs at least Rs. 8000. The goal is that 12 Vande Bharat Express trains should also start running in 2026. Undoubtedly, the railways and their speed are on the path of development, they will reach their destination faster, but they have not done much in the area of providing more convenience to the common man. Even today, we have not been able to guarantee a ticket and a seat to the passengers of Indian Railways. They get a proper seat only after overcoming the hurdles of the waiting list. It is said that we will give lower berths to senior citizens, but even that is not yet guaranteed in the train compartments. Earlier, during the Covid days, the concession given to senior citizens on train tickets was withdrawn.

WHY THE NEW YEAR DOES NOT NEED A NEW YOU

(Why Reinventing yourself is not always welcome)

Parneet Sachdev
Chairman of Real Estate Regulatory Authority and a leading author

The Inner Realm

Each New Year arrives with a familiar moral instruction. Become better. Become leaner, calmer, more productive, more successful. The calendar, it is assumed, demands a transformation of the person who turns its pages. This belief has hardened into ritual. The underlying message is unmistakable

The self that endured the previous year
is inadequate for the one ahead.

THE COST OF RADICAL SELF SETTING

This assumption deserves analysis, not because growth is undesirable, but because the way modern culture frames change is psychologically costly and spiritually incoherent. *Reinvention, when treated as a prerequisite for worth, often produces the very stagnation it seeks to overcome.* Behavioural science has long questioned the effectiveness of radical self-resetting. *Studies on habit formation show that abrupt, high-intensity behavioural change carries a high rate of attrition, particularly when undertaken under conditions of cognitive and emotional load.* Research synthesised by the American Psychological Association demonstrates that resolution-based change fails not due to lack of motivation, but because it ignores identity continuity and neural fatigue (APA Monitor on Psychology, 2020). *The brain resists change that feels like a rejection of the self rather than an extension of it.*

Modern psychology offers a precise framework for understanding why the "New You" narrative backfires. Self-discrepancy theory, developed by E. Tory Higgins, shows that when the gap between the "actual self" and the "ideal self" becomes too wide, individuals experience increased anxiety, shame, and disengagement rather than motivation.

The pursuit of an idealised future identity triggers a threat response, not a growth response (Psychological Review, 1987).

Neuroscience deepens this insight. Functional MRI studies indicate that sustained self-criticism activates the brain's default threat circuitry, particularly the amygdala, while self-compassion and acceptance engage neural networks associated with learning and behavioural flexibility. *A landmark study from Stanford University demonstrated that individuals who approach personal change from a stance of acceptance show greater long-term behavioural persistence than those driven by self-judgment* (Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research, 2016).

What masquerades as discipline in many New Year resolutions is, at a neural level, a form of chronic self-threat.

ANCIENT WISDOM AND THE CONTINUITY OF THE SELF

Long before modern psychology articulated these mechanisms, classical wisdom traditions had reached similar conclusions. The Bhagavad Gita does not advocate personal reinvention; it emphasises **abhyasa—steady, repeated practice anchored in self-knowledge rather than self-rejection.**

Action, Krishna explains to Arjuna, must arise from clarity, not from contempt for one's present condition *(Bhagavad Gita).*

Buddhist psychology follows a similar arc. The Buddha explicitly rejected sudden self-overhaul, teaching instead that liberation emerges through mindful observation of thought, sensation, and impulse over time.

Change occurs not by becoming someone else,
but by seeing more clearly what one already is
(Gautama Buddha).

The line recognises imperfection without equating it with inferiority. These traditions converge on a single insight: growth does not require self-replacement. It requires self-understanding.

PRODUCTIVITY, FATIGUE, AND THE MYTH OF ENDLESS UPGRADING

The modern demand for reinvention is inseparable from a broader cultural fixation on optimisation. The self is treated as a project under perpetual renovation, expected to yield ever-higher returns in productivity, emotional regulation, and social performance. Yet cognitive science suggests that this model is fundamentally flawed.Research on ***decision fatigue*** shows that self-regulatory capacity is finite. Roy Baumeister's extensive work on ego depletion demonstrated that sustained effort at self-control without recovery leads to poorer judgment, reduced persistence, and emotional volatility (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1998). Although later studies refined aspects of the theory, the core finding remains robust: humans cannot indefinitely impose improvement upon themselves without replenishment. This has profound implications for New Year resolutions. A person entering January already burdened by unresolved stress, economic uncertainty, or emotional residue from the previous year is neurologically ill-equipped for radical change.

Small, consistent shifts in attention and behaviour reshape neural pathways more reliably than dramatic interventions.

INHABITATION INSTEAD OF REINVENTION

A more durable alternative emerges when the New Year is approached as an invitation to inhabitation. To inhabit oneself is to remain present within one's existing life, roles, and limitations, while gently refining one's responses to them. It is an inward reorientation rather than an outward overhaul. From a scientific perspective, this approach aligns closely with what is known about neuroplasticity. *Small, consistent shifts in attention and behaviour reshape neural pathways more reliably than dramatic interventions.*

Studies from University College London show that habit formation typically requires sustained repetition over weeks or months, not sudden enthusiasm ***(European Journal of Social Psychology, 2009).*** Incremental change, grounded in identity continuity, is neurologically economical. Spiritually, inhabitation resists the moral violence of constant self-improvement and replaces it with attentive living.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

When translated into lived experience, this philosophy produces changes that are subtle, enduring. People begin to notice how many habits persist not out of weakness, but because they once served a protective function. Research in contemplative neuroscience shows that even brief daily periods of non-reactive awareness reduce baseline cortisol levels and improve emotional regulation over time (Harvard Medical School, 2018). They are quiet, gentle recalibrations.

Studies on goal pursuit suggest that publicly announcing intentions can reduce follow-through by providing premature psychological reward (Psychological Science, 2009). *Silent commitments, by contrast, preserve motivational energy.*

A NEW YEAR WITHOUT SELF-ABANDONMENT

One of the most common ideas in modern self-improvement culture is the assumption that mistakes are purely personal failures. Gurbani takes a radically different position. It recognises that human fallibility itself unfolds within divine ordinance (Hukam).

Jo kichh karai so ape karai,
ape karta ape karai.
Whatever happens, He Himself does;
the Creator Himself is the Doer.
-Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 294

This verse dissolves the illusion of absolute self-authorship. Human action is not denied, but contextualised. One is not crushed by guilt, nor absolved of responsibility, but placed within a framework where learning replaces self-condemnation.

Self-Forgiveness as a Form of Grace

The Gurbani repeatedly emphasises that liberation is not achieved through relentless self-punishment, but through grace (Nadar) that awakens insight.

Gunha bakhsanhar sabaia,
ape bakhse ap chhadaia.
He alone is the forgiver of all sins;
He Himself forgives and sets us free.
-Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 1072

Here, forgiveness is not portrayed as moral leniency, but as a divine mechanism for emancipation. To forgive oneself—after honest recognition of error—is not weakness. It is participation in grace. **Sikh philosophy is deeply wary of extremes. Inertia (alas) dulls awareness, but cruelty towards the self fractures learning.** *Growth is possible precisely because human beings are not frozen in virtue or vice. This insight aligns strikingly with modern behavioural science, which shows that identity-based condemnation ("I am a failure") inhibits change far more than behaviour-based correction ("This action failed").*

This Sikh understanding finds an unexpected echo in ***Stoic philosophy***. Marcus Aurelius wrote that one should begin each day expecting human failure—both one's own and that of others—and resolve not to be disturbed by it.

In both traditions, the moral task is the same: neither indulgence nor severity, but steadiness. One fails, reflects, forgives, adjusts, and continues.

Taken together, Gurbani, Stoicism, and modern psychology converge on a single insight: Laziness and complacency arrest growth. Excessive self-criticism corrodes it. Between these extremes lies a disciplined gentleness—a willingness to learn without self-hatred, to change without self-rejection.

As the year begins, perhaps the most disciplined act is not to reinvent oneself, but to remain present, constantly improving. The New Year does not need a new you. Rather a consistently better version of you. Compassionate!Confucian wisdom, grounded in social and moral realism, captured this ethic as below

"Better a diamond with a flaw than a pebble without"

(Views expressed are the author's own).

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

"The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings." **-Masanobu Fukuoka, Japanese farmer and philosopher**

Why India's small cities will shape its next decade

India's future is often imagined in megacities. Policy debates revolve around Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru or Hyderabad, while glossy projections celebrate tech corridors and financial hubs. Yet the country's next decade will be shaped less by these metropolitan giants and more by its hundreds of small and mid-sized cities—places rarely at the centre of national imagination but critical to India's social and economic trajectory.

Cities like Ujjain, Alwar, Baramulla, Tirunelveli, Silchar or Chitradurga are quietly absorbing the pressures of urbanisation. They are growing not because of planned investment booms, but because villages around them are emptying out. Farmers displaced by climate stress, young people seeking education, and families priced out of metros are all converging on these towns. What emerges is neither rural nor fully urban, but a hybrid India still learning how to govern itself.

Unlike metros, small cities operate with limited institutional capacity. Municipal bodies often lack trained planners, reliable data, or financial autonomy. Urban growth here happens informally—through unplanned housing, overstretched water systems, and roads built after neighbourhoods already exist. Yet these cities rarely feature in national conversations about urban reform, even though they host a large share of India's population growth.

Employment patterns tell a similar story. While metros

attract global capital and formal-sector jobs, small cities are sustained by fragile local economies—construction, retail, transport, public services, and small manufacturing. These jobs are resilient in some ways, but vulnerable in others. A delayed payment, a failed monsoon, or a health emergency can disrupt entire households. Strengthening these local economies is not glamorous, but it is essential.

Small cities also play an overlooked social role. They are often where traditions adapt rather than disappear. Festivals are still community-run, public spaces remain shared, and social networks are dense. At the same time, these cities are not insulated from modern anxieties. Rising aspirations, exposure to social media, and limited opportunities create quiet pressures, especially among young people who feel caught between ambition and constraint.Infrastructure choices made now will determine whether these cities become engines of inclusion or sites of strain. Reliable public transport, affordable rental housing, functional healthcare, and clean water systems matter more here than showcase projects. The challenge is not building smart cities, but building cities that work.

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India's local markets still matter in a digital economy

India's digital economy is expanding at remarkable speed. Online shopping, app-based deliveries and instant payments have reshaped how urban Indians consume goods. Yet, across towns and cities, India's local markets continue to thrive—not as leftovers from a slower past, but as systems that adapt, endure and quietly anchor everyday life.

From weekly haats in rural districts to dense vegetable markets in metropolitan neighbourhoods, these spaces remain central to how most Indians buy food, negotiate prices and build social connections. Despite the rise of e-commerce, local markets have not disappeared. Instead, they have revealed something essential about the Indian economy: convenience alone does not replace trust, proximity and human interaction.

For millions of small traders, vendors and farmers, local markets are not just points of sale but lifelines. They provide low-entry opportunities for employment, especially for those excluded from formal sectors—women, migrants and older workers. A vegetable seller does not need venture capital or algorithms. She needs a cart, a supplier and a regular customer base. In a country where job creation struggles to keep pace with population growth, this informality offers resilience.

Local markets also absorb economic shocks better than expected. During disruptions—from demonetisation to the pandemic—many digital systems faltered temporarily, while neighbourhood vendors adapted quickly. Credit was extended informally, prices adjusted daily and supply chains rerouted through personal networks.

For millions of small traders, vendors and farmers, local markets are not just points of sale but lifelines. They provide low-entry opportunities for employment, especially for those excluded from formal sectorswomen, migrants and older workers.

These markets operate on relationships built over years, not contracts enforced by platforms.

Food security is another overlooked role. Local markets distribute perishable produce efficiently, reducing dependence on long storage chains. Fruits, vegetables, grains and spices move quickly from farms to consumers, often within the same district. This short supply chain benefits farmers through better price realisation and consumers through freshness. In contrast, centralised distribution systems often squeeze producers while inflating costs.

Culturally, markets function as shared public spaces. They are among the few places where social classes intersect without design. A salaried professional, a domestic worker and a shopkeeper bargain at the same stall. Conversations happen across age, caste and income—not out of idealism, but routine. In an increasingly fragmented society, such interactions matter.

Yet, India's urban planning often treats markets as problems rather than assets. Redevelopment projects prioritise malls and commercial complexes, pushing traditional markets into narrower lanes or relocating them without understanding their ecology. Vendors are seen as obstructions to traffic rather than contributors to local economies. When markets are displaced, livelihoods are disrupted and neighbourhoods lose their character.

There is also pressure from digital platforms that promise efficiency but extract heavy commissions. Many small sellers join these platforms hoping for growth, only to find margins shrinking. The technology itself is not the problem; the imbalance of power is. Without safeguards, digital integration risks turning independent traders into dependent contractors.

Some cities are experimenting with better models. Designated vending zones, improved sanitation, waste management and weather-proof infrastructure have helped markets function more effectively. Where vendors are included in planning decisions, outcomes improve. Markets become cleaner, safer and more organised without losing their informal strength.

The future does not lie in choosing between digital convenience and traditional markets. It lies in integration without erasure. Digital payments, inventory tools and logistics support can strengthen local markets if ownership remains with vendors. Policies should focus on enabling rather than replacing these systems.

India's local markets remind us that economic progress is not always linear. Sometimes it is layered—new systems growing alongside old ones, each serving different needs. In chasing scale and speed, India must not undervalue spaces that prioritise access, dignity and community.As the economy modernises, the survival of local markets will depend not on nostalgia, but on recognition. Recognising that growth is strongest when it includes those who sell tomatoes at dawn, weigh rice by hand and remember their customers by name.

Why public libraries still matter in an age of screens

In an era dominated by smartphones, streaming platforms, and algorithm-driven content, public libraries may appear outdated. Rows of quiet shelves feel out of place in a country racing toward digital transformation. Yet across India, public libraries continue to play a quiet but indispensable role—one that deserves renewed attention.

For millions, libraries are not nostalgic spaces but practical ones. In small towns and district headquarters, they remain among the few public institutions that are free, open, and non-judgmental. Students preparing for competitive exams crowd reading rooms each morning. Job seekers browse newspapers for listings that never appear online. Elderly readers return daily, not just for books but for routine, conversation, and continuity.

India's digital divide makes libraries more relevant, not less. While internet access has expanded rapidly, quality access has not. Data costs may be low, but devices, connectivity stability, and digital literacy vary sharply. Libraries bridge this gap by offering shared resources—computers, Wi-Fi, reference material—and, crucially, a structured environment for learning.

Libraries also support forms of reading that screens struggle to replicate. Long-form attention, deep focus, and critical thinking thrive in spaces designed for slowness. In a country where education often prioritises rote learning and test performance, libraries encourage curiosity without pressure. A reader chooses what to explore, how long to stay, and when to return. That autonomy matters.

Beyond education, libraries function as democratic spaces. They are among the few places where people from different backgrounds coexist without transaction. There is no ticket to buy, no obligation to consume. In an increasingly commercial public sphere, this neutrality is powerful. Libraries quietly uphold the idea that knowledge is a public good.

Yet many Indian libraries are struggling. Buildings are poorly maintained, collections outdated, and librarians undertrained or overburdened. Some survive only because of local volunteers or dedicated staff.

What India gains when public spaces sre taken seriously

In India, public spaces have often been treated as afterthoughts—leftover land between roads, buildings, and commercial zones. Parks, libraries, footpaths, and community grounds were rarely seen as essential infrastructure. Yet across the country, a quiet shift is underway. From small neighbourhood parks to reclaimed riverfronts and revived town squares, India is slowly relearning the value of shared spaces.

Public spaces matter because they are among the few places where social boundaries soften. In a country deeply divided by class, caste, gender, and religion, a park bench or walking path offers rare neutrality. Children play together, elderly people walk side by side, and strangers coexist without formal invitation. These everyday interactions may seem insignificant, but they form the social glue of urban and semi-urban life.

The renewed attention to public spaces is partly driven by necessity. India's cities are dense, noisy, and increasingly stressful. For millions living in small homes, public areas function as extensions of private space. Morning walks, evening conversations, and informal exercise routines depend on access to safe, open environments. Without them, mental and physical health costs quietly rise.

Small towns are offering important lessons. In many district centres, public spaces still revolve around bus stands, markets, playgrounds, and temple courtyards. While often poorly maintained, these areas remain socially active. People linger, talk, and observe. Unlike gated parks or ticketed attractions, they allow spontaneous use. Preserving this openness as towns modernise will be crucial.

Women's access to public spaces remains a defining challenge. A space that exists but feels unsafe is effectively closed. Improvements in lighting, visibility, and regular use can transform perception. Where women are seen walking, exercising, or sitting without purpose, public spaces become more democratic.

How informal workers keep India running every single day

Every morning in India begins long before offices open or screens light up. It begins with hands sweeping streets, kettles boiling on roadside carts, buses being cleaned, vegetables unloaded, and construction sites coming alive. These early movements belong to India's informal workers—millions of people whose labour sustains daily life, even though their work often remains unseen, uncounted, and undervalued.

India's informal economy employs nearly 90% of the country's workforce. From street vendors and sanitation workers to delivery riders, domestic helpers, agricultural labourers and small repair workers, informal labour forms the backbone of how Indian cities and villages function. Without them, everyday life would slow, falter, and eventually stop.

Unlike formal employment, informal work rarely comes with contracts, fixed wages, paid leave, or social security. Yet it is this flexibility—often born out of necessity—that allows India's economy to adapt quickly to changing conditions. When markets shift, construction pauses, or migration patterns change, informal workers adjust faster than any policy can. They move where work exists, learn new skills on the job, and fill gaps that formal systems fail to anticipate.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, this reality became impossible to ignore. When informal workers disappeared from cities overnight, urban life collapsed. Construction halted, food supply chains broke down, waste piled up, and services stopped functioning smoothly. Their absence revealed a truth long taken for granted: informal workers are not peripheral to India's economy, they are central to it.

Yet even after the crisis, recognition has remained limited. Informal workers are often discussed only in moments of disruption—during strikes, migrations, or disasters—rather than as a permanent foundation of economic life. Their contributions are rarely

reflected in wages, working conditions, or long-term security.

Take street vendors, for example. They provide affordable food, convenience, and livelihoods to millions, yet face frequent eviction and harassment. Domestic workers enable middle-class households to function by managing childcare, cooking, and cleaning, but remain excluded from many labour protections. Construction workers build India's skylines, roads, and infrastructure, yet often live in temporary settlements without basic services.

What sustains informal workers is not institutional support but resilience. Skills are passed down through families and communities. Informal networks provide job leads, emergency loans, and shared resources. Trust replaces paperwork; reputation substitutes for certification. These systems are fragile, but they endure because formal alternatives are often inaccessible.

India's economic growth story is frequently told through statistics, start-ups, and infrastructure projects. But beneath these narratives lies a quieter reality: growth is made possible by people who wake up early, work long hours, and return home without certainty about tomorrow's income. Their labour creates stability for others while their own lives remain precarious.

Improving the conditions of informal work does not require dismantling the informal economy. It requires acknowledging it. Simple measures—access to healthcare, accident insurance, affordable housing, predictable workspaces, and fair regulation—can significantly improve lives without disrupting livelihoods. Policies must be designed with workers, not just for them.

Formalisation, when discussed, is often framed as bringing informal workers into rigid systems that do not reflect their realities. Instead, the goal should be protection without exclusion: recognising informal work as legitimate work, worthy of dignity and security.

India's strength has always rested in its ability to function despite imperfections. Informal workers embody this adaptability. They keep cities clean, food affordable, services accessible, and economies moving. They are present in every neighbourhood, market, station, and street corner.

To truly understand how India runs each day, one must look beyond offices and institutions to the people whose labour rarely pauses and rarely receives applause. Informal workers do not just support the economy—they are the economy. Recognising this is not charity or sentiment. It is realism.Until India learns to value the hands that keep it moving, its progress will remain incomplete—built on effort that is essential, yet still waiting to be fully seen.

Green paradox: planting trees will cool a megacity unless it's dry

Vasudevan Mukunth

Cities around the world are getting hotter for two reasons: the climate is warming and urban areas often trap heat more than the countryside. Planting more vegetation, especially trees, has become a popular 'nature-based' way to cool cities. But how much does this really help?

To answer this, researchers from Australia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Switzerland recently compared the temperature over different kinds of urban land cover, including trees, grasslands, croplands, and built-up surfaces like concrete and asphalt, in 761 megacities in 105 countries worldwide, including India. They defined a measure called temperature regulation capability: the temperature of a vegetated area minus the temperature of a built-up area. If the number was negative, vegetation was cooler, and vice versa.

When they analysed the data, the researchers found a paradox. In many cities, vegetation cooled, but in dry places, it could warm. Across all cities, grasslands cooled built-up areas in 78% of cases and trees cooled in 98%. But in almost a fourth of cities, especially in places with under 1,000 mm of rain a year, urban grasslands and croplands were hotter than built-up areas, creating net warming. Even trees showed warming in 2% of arid cities.

The researchers published their findings in *Science Advances* on January 2. They used a combination of physical effects to explain the paradox. Vegetation can cool a surface by evapotranspiration, i.e., water evaporating from soil and transpiring from leaves, carrying heat away. But vegetation can also absorb more sunlight if it reflects less light than some built surfaces. In arid cities, the cooling weakens because water is scarce, so evapotranspiration is limited. Then the warming could 'win', i.e. reflection-driven warming plus changes in stored heat could outweigh the weaker cooling.

The authors also examined what happened during extremely hot summers. In about 75% of cities, trees reduced how much the temperature rose compared to built-up areas. Grasslands and croplands often did the opposite, worsening the heat increase in about 71% and 82% of cities. One reason was that extreme heat often came with a large deficit in the vapour pressure, which caused many grasses and crops to shut down water loss more strongly, reducing cooling from evapotranspiration.

As the authors concluded, planting trees is not a simple solution and "misguided greening risks are worsening urban warming".

Earthlife is made of space stuff, studies of asteroid Bennu hint

OSIRIS-REx samples from Bennu show the asteroid carries ribose, glucose, amino acids, nucleobases; discovery includes nitrogen-rich polymers, presolar grains of supernova origin, raising questions about how earth acquired life's ingredients

Sandhya Ramesh

In 2020, a spacecraft more than 3 lakh km away on a small asteroid called Bennu collected samples of its surface. The craft, part of NASA's OSIRIS REx mission, then launched itself towards the earth, dropping off the canister of samples in September 2023. Since then, scientists in the US and Japan have been studying pieces of Bennu to answer fundamental questions about the formation of the early solar system and life on the earth.

On December 2, three teams published papers reporting Bennu contains sugar and other important molecules required to form RNA, and is also surprisingly abundant in supernova dust from a time before the sun formed.

When the solar system was forming from the cloud of dust and gas swirling around the sun, several smaller rocks were pushed around as well, and often clumped together. Bennu's larger parent asteroid formed in this way around the same time as the sun, 4.6 billion years ago, somewhere beyond Saturn. When Jupiter migrated to its present orbit, the parent was kicked into the asteroid belt, where it collided with other rocks. Over millennia, fragments from the parent gave rise to Bennu, which today orbits the sun between the earth and Mars.

In a *Nature Geoscience* paper, scientists led by Tohoku University in Japan reported finding ribose, the sugar molecule present in RNA, and glucose, the sugar molecule required for metabolism, on Bennu. Together with previous findings of amino acids and all the five nucleobases found in DNA and RNA, the entire inventory of molecules scientists believe are needed for life have now been confirmed on Bennu.

"For 5-C to convert to 6-C sugar, the optimal mix of environmental conditions such as very little but liquid brine, the right pH, and extremely low temperatures are required, which the asteroid possessed at formation," Kuljeet Kaur Marhas, professor and head of the Planetary Labs Analysis Section at the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad, who works with samples of the asteroid Itokawa, said.

The findings strengthen the 'RNA world' hypothesis: that early life used RNA as a source of genetic information and for catalytic functions, before DNA and proteins evolved. According to the study, the abundance of asteroids like Bennu in the inner solar system would have provided sugars and amino acids, leading to the formation of life on the earth more than 3.5 billion years ago.

Chemical reactions

Scientists have also reported evidence of chemical reactions between ices forming polymer molecules before the ices melted. In a *Nature Astronomy* paper, a second team from NASA thus explained the discovery of polymers of nitrogen- and oxygen-rich materials on Bennu. This material, called carbamate, would have been soft and gummy when it formed, hardening since. Scientists haven't found this material in extraterrestrial samples before.

At the time Bennu's parent formed, volatile compound ices like frozen ammonia, known to accumulate on asteroids' primordial surfaces, could have been heated by random radioactive decay. This would have liquefied the ices, which seeped into rocky pores and deposited the salts and minerals dissolved in them there. Bennu could have 'inherited' a piece of this.

Dust and gas in the early presolar system were formed from other exploding stars. By analysing the dust, astronomers hope to find clues about the elements that made up its counterpart in the early solar system, which could help understand how planets formed.

In a third paper also published in *Nature Astronomy*, a different NASA team showed the presolar grains on Bennu had indeed been disturbed and moved around by moving liquids on the asteroid's surface. The concentration of presolar grains was at least 6x higher than in other similar asteroid and meteorite samples.

The team also reported signs the grains had been singed by heat released when the great mass of dust collapsed to form our sun.

Studies of the grains revealed they originated from various types of stars and supernovae. Of these, the concentrations of grains of supernovae-origin were the highest, indicating it was present in abundant quantities in the part of space where Bennu's parent formed.

"Why exactly there is an abundance of supernova-origin presolar grains is the biggest question, as Bennu is just like plenty of other asteroids in its neighbourhood," Dr. Marhas, who also reviewed the presolar grains paper, said.

"Will we find similar concentrations if we sample previously studied asteroids in different locations or is there something specific that makes the ordinary-seeming Bennu extremely special?"

Sandhya Ramesh is a freelance science journalist

Whence life?

Scientists are studying space rocks to answer fundamental questions about the early solar system and life on the earth

A composite image of Bennu after two years of observation by NASA OSIRIS-REx. NASA

- NASA's OSIRIS-REx mission collected samples from asteroid Bennu in 2020, brought them to the earth in 2023
- Scientists are using these samples' materials to probe early solar system chemistry and the origins of life on the earth
- Three new studies report Bennu contains amino acids, nucleobases, and newly detected sugars including ribose and glucose
- The findings support the RNA world hypothesis, with asteroids supplying key molecules to early earth 3.5 billion years ago
- Researchers also found signs that nitrogen 'delivered' from space could have helped life form around hydrothermal vents
- Bennu also showed unusually abundant presolar grains, especially supernova dust, raising questions about its formation region

Here's how you're paying to use 'free' social media

DECODED

John Xavier

A flurry of developments around artificial intelligence tools and applications in the past year might suggest a lull in social media patterns and usage. But a closer look at how people engaged on some of the top social media platforms tell a different story.

Current estimates show that over 5.6 billion people maintain at least one active social media account. The average user now juggles accounts across nearly seven platforms, from messaging apps to video feeds and professional networks. Each handle represents a carefully curated digital persona, maintained not just for self-expression, but to remain socially and professionally visible. What began as a tool for connection has quietly evolved into a continuous obligation.

A persistent myth underpins this system: that social media is free. After all, there is no upfront payment, no monthly invoice, and no credit card required at sign-up. But the absence of a price tag does not mean the absence of a cost. Instead of money, we pay with something far scarcer. Time and attention.

Only a few years ago, average daily social media use hovered around two hours. This trend seems to be going up to two and a half hours per day, driven largely by short-form video and algorithmic feeds designed for frictionless consumption. That adds up to more than 75 hours per month, which is nearly two full workweeks devoted solely to scrolling.

The cost becomes clearer with a simple calculation. Take your monthly income and divide it by the number of hours you work to estimate your true hourly value. Now multiply that rate by the time you spend each day on social platforms. The result is the implicit "fee" you pay for scrolling through digital feeds. For many people, this hidden cost rivals discretionary expenses like dining out, watching a movie, or even a portion of rent. The difference is that, unlike money, these hours are permanently gone.

AI makes it possible to publish thousands of posts a day, optimised for engagement signals rather than substance. GETTY IMAGES

Platform-level data makes the scale even starker. On TikTok, Android users globally average more than 30 hours per month, largely consumed in rapid-fire bursts of short videos. Similar dynamics exist across Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, where recommendation algorithms are optimised for user retention. The longer you stay, the more data you generate, and the more valuable you become to advertisers on those platforms.

This environment is now being fundamentally reshaped by generative AI content. The rise of what some call "AI slop" has dramatically increased the volume of content flooding social feeds. (AI slop is low-effort, mass-produced text, images, and videos generated at near-zero cost.)

AI makes it possible to publish hundreds or thousands of posts a day, often optimised for engagement signals rather than substance.

As a result, platforms are becoming frothier, noisier, and harder to navigate.

This explosion of content cuts both ways for engagement. On one hand, more content gives algorithms more material to test, remix, and personalise, which can temporarily boost metrics like watch time and impressions. On the other hand, over-saturation risks diminishing returns. When feeds are dominated by repetitive, shallow, or misleading AI-generated posts, users can experience fatigue, mistrust, and disengagement.

Early signals already suggest a bifurcation: passive scrolling time may rise, while meaningful interaction declines.

In an ecosystem flooded with infinite, instantly generated media, focus itself becomes the most valuable commodity. What we choose to ignore may matter more than what we consume.

Social platforms can still be powerful tools for learning, collaboration, and creativity. But only if we remember that "free" has always been the most expensive price of all.

SNAPSHOTS

Oldest-yet deliberate human cremation found in Malawi

Archaeologists have found an ash and charcoal feature dating to about 9,500 years ago in Malawi, with burnt bone fragments from a small adult within, making it the earliest evidence of an *in situ* adult pyre yet. The ash formed in layers, showing that people repeatedly relit and fed the fire with substantial amounts of deadwood, with uneven heating. People later returned to light more fires at the spot, making the shelter a memorial for later generations.

Microlensing used to weigh distant rogue planet

A study has used microlensing to weigh a rogue planet, i.e. not orbiting a star. A foreground object passes in front of a distant star and its gravity briefly magnifies the star's light. This brightening tells scientists about the object. The technique is difficult for rogues yet the study succeeded by combining observations from ground- and space-based telescopes. The team reported the planet, around 9,800 ly from the Milky Way's centre, weighed as much as Saturn.

Starvation forces leafcutter bees to start adulting

Larvae of many insects begin metamorphosis after reaching a critical weight. But a new study found the trigger in leafcutter bees is starvation, usually 24 hours after not getting food. Food removal reduced gene transcripts linked to making juvenile hormones and increased those linked to producing the molting hormone and to nutrient-sensing insulin. The findings suggest the hormonal machinery responds to food running out, also matching the fact that the adults provision food and larvae can't forage.

Question Corner

For up, go this way

How does my smartphone know which way is up?

Your smartphone knows which way is up due to its accelerometer. It's a chip whose parts shift slightly when the phone accelerates or when gravity acts along a particular direction. The phone's software reads the accelerometer's measurements along the x, y, and z directions and figures out which side is pointing towards the earth.

Phones also have a gyroscope. This is a microelectromechanical sensor with a small vibrating mass on a chip. The phone drives this mass to vibrate back and forth at a fixed frequency. When the phone rotates, the vibrating mass is deflected sideways due to the Coriolis effect. If the chip is vibrating in one direction and the phone rotates around a particular axis, the mass is pushed slightly in a direction perpendicular to the vibration. The sensor has microscopic springs and electrodes to detect this sideways motion and convert it into electric signals, from which the phone estimates the angular velocity, how fast the phone is turning and in which direction.

Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in

What went wrong with a rabies vaccine batch?

Has the problem been rectified? Should patients repeat the doses?

Bindu Shajan Perappadan

The story so far:

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S., issued a health warning late last year about counterfeit human anti-rabies vaccine Abhayrab available in India and in circulation since November 1, 2023. The warning came after rabies cases were seen in travellers from India.

What did the CDC flag?

In its November 25, 2025, travel notice, the CDC said that a counterfeit Abhayrab vaccine for humans has reportedly been circulating in major cities in the country (India) and that this could be both harmful and fail to prevent rabies. Australia maintained that its travellers who had been administered Abhayrab in India after November 1, 2023, should consider the vaccination invalid and initiate a new course of vaccination.

What did the manufacturer say?

On December 27, 2025, Indian Immunologicals Limited (IIL), one of India's leading vaccine manufacturers, which produces Abhayrab, said a counterfeit batch of its human anti-rabies vaccine, Abhayrab, was no longer available on the shelves.

Sunil Tiwari, vice-president and head of quality management at IIL, added that every batch of the vaccine manufactured in India is tested and released by the National Control Laboratory (Central Drugs Laboratory), which is a WHO-Geneva pre-qualified laboratory under the National Regulatory Authority.

What is the protocol to be followed?

If patients suspect that they have received a counterfeit vaccine, the primary protocol is to consult a healthcare provider to determine if replacement doses of a verified, authentic vaccine are needed.

According to Tushar Tayal, associate director, Internal Medicine, CK Birla Hospital, Gurugram, "Repeat rabies vaccination is allowed and safe. The rabies vaccine is an inactivated vaccine, and as such, it does not contain a live virus. It, therefore, becomes safe to be given repeatedly if required. Revaccination is allowed by the health institutions in situations of suspected vaccine effectiveness or exposure."

He explained that following exposure from a bite or exposure as suspected, a complete series of post-exposure prophylaxis is administered. "Revaccination is recommended whenever there is a question of vaccine quality, authenticity, or schedule compliance. In cases where there are doubts about vaccine authenticity, inappropriate dosages, lack of cold chain maintenance, or lack of records, revaccination is recommended," he said.

> Doctors recommend revaccination whenever there is a doubt about vaccine quality, authenticity, or schedule compliance

Doctors add that if a previously vaccinated individual faces fresh exposure with doubts about his/her immunity status, then repeating the dose is advisable. In cases where an immunocompromised person faces a situation where his/her immunity is inadequate, that person might need to be revaccinated. As a life-threatening disease, any question regarding ensuring immunity makes revaccination necessary.

What is the rabies revaccination regimen?

Without a valid vaccination, a person is considered to be previously unvaccinated and needs a full regimen – usually administered on days 0, 3, 7, 14, and 28. Rabies immunoglobulin should be administered in cases of severe exposure. But if a person has been vaccinated previously and there is proper documentation of the same, then only booster doses are needed.

How is India positioned in terms of rabies incidence and control?

The World Health Organization notes that India is endemic for rabies, and accounts for 36% of the world's rabies deaths. The true burden of rabies in India is not fully known; however, as per available information, it causes 18,000-20,000 deaths every year. About 30-60% of reported rabies cases and deaths in India occur in children under the age of 15 years, as bites that occur in children often go unrecognised and unreported.

Rabies deaths in humans are 100% preventable through prompt and appropriate medical care. Vaccinating dogs is the most cost-effective strategy for preventing rabies in people.

India has implemented the National Rabies Control Programme and the joint National Action Plan for Rabies Elimination to achieve the goal of eliminating dog-mediated rabies by 2030.

The WHO and its global partners aim at ending human deaths from dog-mediated rabies through a comprehensive One Health approach promoting mass dog vaccination, ensuring access to PEP, health worker training, improved surveillance, and bite prevention through community awareness.

Which are the airports being privatised?

How were the places selected? When is the tender process likely to begin? What are the privatisation goals a part of? When was the revenue-sharing model replaced by per passenger fee? How does it impact airfares? What are some of the issues being raised by airports?

Jagriti Chandra

The story so far:

The third round of airport privatisation, covering 11 airports to be opened for bids in five bundled groups, has moved a step forward with the Ministry of Civil Aviation sending a proposal to the Public Private Partnership Appraisal Committee (PPPAC) for its in-principle clearance and detailed scrutiny. According to government officials, the five bundles, each comprising metro and non-metro airports, include airports at Amritsar and Kangra; Varanasi, Kushinagar and Gaya; Bhubaneswar and Hubli; Raipur and Aurangabad; Tiruchi and Tirupati.

> The aim should be to ensure the cost of air travel for smaller cities remains affordable

What is the process?

Once the PPPAC completes its appraisal and the Union Cabinet signs off on the plan, bids will be invited from private operators, with the government planning to launch the tender process by March 2026.

The 11 airports were selected from among all AAI (Airports Authority of India) facilities handling 0.1-1 million passengers annually. Projections of future traffic growth and investment requirements then narrowed the list to these top performers for the third privatisation round.

The development comes six years after the plan for privatising 25 airports was first shared by AAI on the conclusion of the privatisation of six airports, bagged by the Adani Group. Sources say the remaining 14 airports would be taken up for privatisation in subsequent rounds.

The privatisation goals are also part of the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP) that aims at monetising operating public infrastructure to unlock idle capital and reinvest that in other assets. Launched in August 2021, the NMP set an aggregate indicative target of ₹6 lakh crore to be raised by leasing brownfield infrastructure assets over the four-year period from FY 2022 to FY 2025.

The target for the airport sector through the privatisation of 25 airports was pegged at ₹20,782 crore, or nearly 4% of the overall NMP value. In all, 88.3% of the total NMP target has been achieved by various infrastructure ministries, of which roads and railways remain the top contributors, but the aviation sector remains a laggard. The Union Budget 2025-26 announced the launch of the Asset Monetisation Plan 2025-30 to plough back ₹10 lakh crore.

On track: The airports were selected from among all Airports Authority of India facilities handling 0.1-1 million passengers annually. R. V. MOORTHY

When did the privatisation of airports start?

Privatisation of airports started in 2003 under the NDA government. It approved the privatisation of two brownfield airports, i.e., Delhi and Mumbai airports, with 26% AAI stake and 74% stake owned by private JV partners. Delhi went to a GMR-led consortium in 2006, Mumbai to a GVK-led consortium in the same year via competitive bidding based on a revenue-share model. Two greenfield PPP airports followed, which included Bengaluru and Hyderabad in 2004.

In 2019, six more airports (Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Jaipur, Mangaluru, Guwahati, Thiruvananthapuram) were privatised, which were all won by the Adani Group. The revenue-share model was replaced by per passenger fee.

For the third round of privatisation, the PPPAC will evaluate key aspects, including revenue-sharing models versus per-passenger fees, cross-subsidisation between metro and non-metro airports in a bundle, and the need for a cap on the number of airports a single entity bags. It will also assess optimal land parcels for non-aeronautical revenue streams that are used to offset airline and passenger fees, and whether the User Development Fee collected from passengers as a component in the airfare will be determined for each airport independently or as a joint asset.

What are the concerns?

Recently, when IndiGo was forced to cancel nearly 5,000 flights in the first two weeks of December, widespread concern was raised about the risks of a duopoly in India's aviation sector. Similar dangers are now emerging in the airport sector, where a monopoly has steadily taken shape over the past five years, with the Adani Group bagging 8 airports – six through privatisation, followed by Mumbai and Navi Mumbai airports, where it acquired GVK's stake.

Consider the recent dispute involving telecom operators, who approached the Department of Telecommunications over what they describe as "extortionary" charges levied at the newly inaugurated Navi Mumbai Airport to allow the use of its in-building solutions and refusal of right of way to set up infrastructure to provide cellular services.

Why are costs rising for both airlines and passengers?

Privatisation often raises concerns about rising costs for airlines and passengers, even as infrastructure investment increases. These concerns are magnified when a large monopoly emerges, leaving airline operators with limited bargaining power and passengers with virtually none.

Take the example of Thiruvananthapuram Airport, where, following its first tariff revision after privatisation to Adani, which was approved by the Airport Economic Regulatory Authority (AERA), the user development fee charged to passengers as part of the airfare increased from ₹506 to ₹770 for domestic travellers for one year, followed by further hikes in subsequent years. Aircraft landing charges were also sharply increased.

Additionally, the regulator pulled up the airport for under-reporting its projection of non-aeronautical revenues, which are meant to cross-subsidise charges levied on airlines and passengers. AERA noted that the projections submitted were based on pre-privatisation and pre-COVID figures from the AAI.

The common man's grievances include high taxi charges at airports, congestion within terminal buildings, limited access to wheelchairs, and being compelled to pay for porter services to overcome challenges of accessibility. A beginning has been made with the airport tariff regulatory body moving towards evaluating airports on service delivery benchmarks and proposing a penalty if these are not met. The service benchmarks include wait time at security gates, check-in time, availability of help desks, and time taken to travel between terminals, among others. It plans a third-party evaluation of these parameters and a penalty in the form of 5% reduction on airport tariff, so that it results in reduced user development fee for passengers.

What lies ahead?

Only about 6% of Indians currently travel by air, highlighting the enormous scope for growth in what is already the world's third-largest aviation market. While affordability remains a key factor, the low penetration rate makes it clear that air travel in India is far from saturated. To meet rising demand, the government has set a goal of building 50 new airports over the next five years and expanding the existing network of 163 airports. By FY2026, India's airports are expected to have a combined passenger-handling capacity of around 550 million passengers per annum (mppa), factoring in new facilities such as Navi Mumbai Airport and the upcoming Noida International Airport. Industry estimates suggest that airport capacity will need to grow to about 850 mppa within five years. Supporting this growth will require more than just new airports and will also depend on the presence of financially robust airlines.

Where does India stand on acid attacks?

What is survivor and social activist Shaheen Malik fighting for? What happened to her case in court? How many cases were reported in 2023, the latest National Crime Records Bureau data available? Why is the crime severely under-reported? Why is the conviction rate low despite laws?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

When a Delhi court acquitted the three main accused in a vicious 2009 acid attack case on December 24, 2025, it was not just a devastating end to a 16-year battle for justice fought by survivor and social activist Shaheen Malik, but also shone a harsh light on the situation of acid attack survivors. Ms. Malik was a 26-year-old MBA student and counsellor in Panipat when she was attacked outside her workplace, resulting in the loss of vision in one eye and 25 reconstructive surgeries. She plans to appeal the verdict in the Delhi High Court but says it will discourage other survivors from seeking justice. Hers is not an isolated story: of 703 acid attack cases in Indian courts in 2023, the last year for which data is available, there were 16 convictions and 27 acquittals.

> In 2023, 57 reported acid attacks took place in West Bengal, 31 in Uttar Pradesh, and 15 in Gujarat, the three worst affected States

What are acid attacks?

An acid attack is an assault where a corrosive substance is thrown on or administered to a person with the intention of harming them. Sulphuric, hydrochloric, and nitric acids are the most commonly used substances. They can melt the skin and flesh, dissolve bones, causing severe burns, scarring, blindness, maiming, or even a permanent vegetative state, apart from psychological trauma and socio-economic harm.

The majority of victims are women and young girls, while perpetrators are almost always men. A 2024 analysis of 55 cases in India by the Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) found that motives were related to personal relationship issues in three-fourths of attacks against women, including revenge for spurning romantic or sexual advances, dowry-related disputes, suspicions of infidelity, and domestic abuse.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, there were 207 reported cases of acid attacks in 2023, the last year for which data is available, an increase from 202 in 2022 and 176 in 2021. There were also 65 cases of acid attack attempts. The crime is severely underreported due to societal stigma, family pressure, and fear of retaliation. ASTI estimates that there are likely 1,000 attacks per year in India.

In 2023, 57 reported acid attacks took place in West Bengal, 31 in Uttar Pradesh, and 15 in Gujarat, the three worst affected States.

Safety first: Survivors call for a more comprehensive ban on the sale of acid and stricter implementation of existing rules. FILE PHOTO

What are the laws against acid attacks in India?

Section 124 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita mandates a minimum punishment of 10 years in prison up to life imprisonment, and a "just and reasonable" fine to meet the victim's medical expenses. An acid attack attempt is to be punished by five to seven years' imprisonment. The law also requires all public and private hospitals to provide free treatment to victims.

In 2013, the Supreme Court mandated the regulation of acid sales, with a photo ID for buyers, and sellers required to keep a register of purchases, but this is poorly implemented.

In 2023, the NCRB reported that the police were investigating 113 acid attack cases, along with 53 cases pending from the previous year, and 86 cases were chargesheeted and sent for trial. There were 649 cases pending trial from the previous year. The accused were convicted in only 16 cases, including pending cases, while 27 cases saw acquittal in the course of the year.

Ms. Malik's experience puts a human face on those statistics. "Just the fact that I did not get a verdict for 16 years when the case should have been completed in six months is a denial of justice. The police investigation was shoddy, there was evidence that was ignored, there was extreme judicial insensitivity... The judge even falsely accused me of having an emotional relationship with the accused," she told *The Hindu*. "The investigating officer pushed me to settle the case instead of taking it to court and the accused offered me crores of rupees. I did not take one paisa because I wanted my rights, not money... Who will be willing to go to court after this?" she asks, noting that not one of the 300 survivors supported by her Brave Souls Foundation has yet secured a conviction in their trials, though most have been offered out-of-court settlements. Ms. Malik also had to go to court to get the ₹3 lakh she is entitled to from the State as compensation, receiving the money nine years after the crime.

What steps are needed to end this crime and support survivors?

Survivors have called for a more comprehensive ban on the sale of acid and stricter implementation of the existing rules. "The sub-divisional magistrate is responsible for monitoring acid sale; has even one SDM been punished for illegal sales? In Bangladesh, a shop is sealed within 30 days if they are openly selling acid," says Ms. Malik. The neighbouring country passed stringent laws against acid sales and attacks in 2002, accompanied by large-scale public awareness campaigns, after which the number of reported attacks has fallen 15% to 20% each year, according to the Acid Survivors Foundation of Bangladesh; from 494 attacks in 2002, there were only 13 attacks in 2024.

Sensitisation of judges, public prosecutors and judges, fast track courts, legal support and counselling for victims, and penalisation of judicial delays are essential to improve conviction rates and create a stronger deterrent. The Justice J.S. Verma Committee's recommendations for a national fund to cover lifelong medical, psychological, educational, and skilling needs of survivors must be implemented for comprehensive rehabilitation.

PROFILES

Monroe Doctrine reloaded

Strike on Venezuela

By bombing Venezuela, the U.S. is seeking to reestablish its primacy in the Western Hemisphere, check the influence of its rivals in the region and install a friendly regime in the country which has one of the world's largest proven oil reserves

Stanly Johny

Donald Trump had set his sights on Venezuela during his first term. Then, his administration formally charged President Nicolas Maduro and his top aides with alleged involvement in drug trafficking. Juan Guaido, an opposition politician, was recognised by the U.S. and its Western allies as the acting President of Venezuela. After Mr. Trump returned to power in early 2025, his immediate foreign policy priority was Venezuela. The administration declared a 'war on drugs' and accused Mr. Maduro of being 'one of the largest narco-traffickers in the world'. It began bombing civilian boats off Venezuela claiming they were carrying drugs, and deployed jets, warships and thousands of troops to the Caribbean. Mr. Trump said he had authorised the CIA to carry out a clandestine operation inside Venezuela, and imposed a naval quarantine on oil tankers to and from the country.

Skeletal remains: A destroyed anti-aircraft unit at La Carlota military air base in Caracas, Venezuela, after the U.S. attack on Saturday. REUTERS

Regime change

On January 3, a day after Mr. Maduro offered "serious talks" with Washington, the U.S. carried out large scale air strikes in the Latin American country. The Venezuelan government "denounced" the military aggression and declared a state of emergency. Mr. Trump acknowledged the strikes in a social media post and claimed that Mr. Maduro and his wife "were captured" and taken out of the country. While it is not immediately clear whether the abduction of Venezuela's sitting President would mark an end to the socialist regime, Mr. Trump seems to be moving fast with his plan of aggression. What he wants is clear: regime change. María Corina Machado, Venezuela's right-wing opposition leader who won this year's Nobel Peace Prize, 'absolutely supports' Mr. Trump's policies.

Why does Mr. Trump want regime change in Venezuela, a country that doesn't pose any serious security challenges to America? Venezuela is not even a major source of drug production, and Washington hasn't provided any evidence to substantiate its claim that the Maduro regime was running cartels.

Three broad reasons can be identified for the U.S. aggression.

One, Mr. Trump wants to reimpose American primacy in the Western Hemisphere. President James Monroe declared in 1823 that the Americas were off-limits to future European interference and colonisation. What later came to be known as the Monroe Doctrine, the policy established U.S. hegemony in its backyard, carving out a sphere of influence.

The recently released *National Security Doctrine* of the Trump administration identifies Latin America and the Caribbean as a strategic priority – a Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which American media and experts dubbed the 'Donroe Doctrine', after Donald Trump. The document asserts that the U.S. must deny influence or control by outside powers [read China] in Latin America and ensure that the Western Hemisphere remains under American political, economic and military influence.

Two, while reinforcing American primacy, the U.S. would also want to keep the Chinese and Russian influence in the region under check. China has already made huge investments in Latin America through its Belt and Road Initiative, which Beijing claims have 24 signatories in the region. China is also the largest or the second largest trading partner of most countries in the region.

In his second term, Mr. Trump has supported far-right figures in the continent, from Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil to Javier Milei in Argentina. In Honduras, Nasry Asfura, a Trump-endorsed right-wing candidate, won the presidency last month. With the return of the right-wing, the U.S. and its allies are rolling back South America's pink tide. While there are still a few left-wing governments in Latin America, two of them publicly defy American dominance and seek stronger strategic and economic ties with China and Russia – Venezuela and Cuba. Of the two, Venezuela holds a prime spot because of its vast reserves of liquid gold.

China accounts for nearly 80% of Venezuela's oil purchases. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is also the largest foreign company with investments and operations in Venezuela's oil sector. Even though China has scaled back its investments in Venezuela due to American sanctions, in 2024, China Concord Resources Corporation, a private company, signed a $1-billion agreement with PDVSA, Venezuela's state oil company, to develop two oilfields in Lake Maracaibo. Earlier in 2025, the Trump administration forced Panama to pull back from the China-led BRI. If the Maduro regime is forcibly brought down, the U.S. could send a strong message to other weaker powers in the region against economic and security cooperation with China and Russia.

It's about oil

The third reason could be oil. Venezuela has about 17% of the world's known oil reserves, or more than 300 billion barrels, nearly four times the reserves of the U.S. American companies such as ExxonMobil and Gulf Oil were active players in Venezuela's oil sector until the 1976 nationalisation. When left-wing leader Hugo Chavez came to power in 1999, he tightened the state control over oil resources through another wave of nationalisation and used oil profits to launch poverty eradication projects. (In 2002, there was a coup against Chavez, which was backed by the U.S. But Chavez was brought back to power within 48 hours in the face of mass protests against the coup plotters).

Last month, Mr. Trump demanded Venezuela return all the "stolen American oil, land and assets", in a direct reference to Venezuela's nationalisation of its oil resources. He also made it clear that he wanted Venezuelan oil for American companies–which would help the U.S. reduce its dependence on Persian Gulf oil and force China out of Venezuela.

Mr. Trump had said this earlier as well. In 2019, after the first Trump administration recognised Juan Guaido as the acting President of Venezuela, Mr. Trump had ordered his aides to demand Mr. Guaido to commit to giving the U.S. access to his country's oil and ousting China and Russia if he wrested power, John Bolton, Mr. Trump's former National Security Adviser, wrote in his memoir. In 2023, Mr. Trump said: "When I left [in 2021], Venezuela was ready to collapse. We would have taken it over. We would have gotten all that oil".

Now, with the strike on Venezuela and the claimed capture of Mr. Maduro, Mr. Trump appears close to achieving his objective. Ms. Machado, the West's favourite Venezuelan politician who could succeed Mr. Maduro should the regime collapse, has already promised to open up Venezuela's oil sector. "We will open all, upstream, midstream, downstream, to all companies," she said on a podcast hosted by Donald Trump Jr., the President's eldest son. She added that the minerals and power sectors would also be opened up for foreign [read American] companies.

THE GIST

- The recently released National Security Doctrine of the Trump administration identifies Latin America and the Caribbean as a strategic priority — a Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine
- Venezuela has about 17% of the world's known oil reserves, or more than 300 billion barrels, nearly four times the reserves of the U.S.
- Last month, Mr. Trump demanded Venezuela return all the "stolen American oil, land and assets", in a direct reference to Venezuela's nationalisation of its oil resources

Enigmatic mayor

Balendra Shah

The rapper-engineer architects his leap into national politics, eyeing the prime ministerial chair as Nepal heads to elections

Sanjeev Satgainya

REUTERS

A known figure. But an unknown character.

That is how many describe Balendra Shah, the current Mayor of Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city.

Popularly known as "Balen", the rapper-turned-mayor has now officially made his foray into national politics. Last week, he joined the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), which has projected him as its prime ministerial candidate for the general election slated for March 5.

Until the run-up to the 2022 local elections, when Balen decided to throw his hat into the ring for the highly coveted post of Kathmandu Mayor, he was known largely within a limited circle, mostly among the youth, as a rap singer.

Much of his mayoral campaign played out on social media, particularly Facebook. Running as an independent candidate, Balen was assigned a walking stick as his election symbol. Against expectations, he trounced candidates from established political parties – a feat many summed up with the refrain: Balen beat the parties with the stick.

He rarely gives speeches, avoids interviews, and maintains almost no direct engagement with the public. Instead, he communicates almost exclusively through social media.

In one such instance in September 2023, after a vehicle from his office was stopped during a routine check, Balen wrote on Facebook that he would "burn Singha Durbar," a remark referring to Nepal's central seat of power. He later deleted the post but offered no clarification on the context or intent behind the statement.

Two years later, during the second day of the Gen Z-led protests against corruption, nepotism and misgovernance, several government buildings, including parts of Singha Durbar, were vandalised and set ablaze by demonstrators.

In a Facebook post ahead of the protests, he wrote that he fully supported the cause but would not take to the streets himself, noting that he was not part of Gen Z. It was the 35-year-old Mayor who later urged protest leaders to enter into dialogue with the Nepal Army, which had emerged as the chief negotiator between Gen Z representatives and President Ram Chandra Poudel.

After 19 – later revised to 22 – people died on the first day of the protests on September 8, then Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli resigned the next day. Later that day, in a provocative social media post, Balen wrote, "...the resignation of your murderer has come," as he urged protest groups to "exercise restraint".

Under scrutiny

As protest groups conducted an online vote to select a consensus candidate to lead a civilian government, Balen endorsed Sushila Karki, a former Chief Justice. President Poudel subsequently appointed her as Prime Minister on September 12. Ms. Karki dissolved Parliament immediately after taking the oath.

In the past three years, his performance as Kathmandu Mayor has increasingly come under scrutiny. Critics point to his high-handed approach toward street vendors and landless squatters. Meanwhile, basic civic challenges, such as drinking water and waste management, remain unresolved.

His agreement last week with Rabi Lamichhane, the RSP chief, following days of negotiations, surprised many. The two are sharply contrasting figures: Balen is reclusive, while Mr. Lamichhane is gregarious. Only days after the Gen Z protests, Balen had lashed out on Facebook using expletives against all political parties, including the RSP.

How an off-standish Balen would fare in national politics – which demands public engagement, negotiation, and compromise – has yet to be tested. His strength largely rests on personal mystique, which he may not be able to maintain once he starts going to the hustings.

As someone who won independently, Balen did not have a party, and forming a new political outfit with elections just two months away would have been an uphill task. Mr. Lamichhane's offer to join his party, the RSP – which already has an organisational base – and become the prime ministerial face was too good to resist, analysts say.

Since the deal last week, Balen – mostly seen donning a black blazer over a T-shirt, with black shades a permanent fixture – has not made a single public appearance, even as speculation about his resignation as mayor circulates.

For now, Balen remains what he has long been: a familiar face, but a sphinx-like enigma.

The junta in civilian clothing

USDP

The party in Myanmar functions as a strategic instrument of the junta within a multi-party system where the military retains ultimate power through constitutional guarantees

Srinivasan Ramani

AP

Five years after staging a military coup that overturned the 2020 election results and imprisoned elected leaders, including National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, Myanmar's junta is now attempting to legitimise its rule through elections. The poll has been denounced as a sham by the international community, with the regime's allies – Russia, Belarus and neighbouring China – sending observers to lend it credibility.

The first phase of the poll was held on December 28, 2025, with the remaining two scheduled for early and late January. However, these polls cover only about half of Myanmar's territory, with the rest beyond the junta's reach due to the ongoing civil war involving the NLD-led National Unity Government's Bamar-dominated People's Defence Forces and ethnic armed organisations across the country.

In results that were a foregone conclusion, the military's proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) claimed victory in nearly 80% of contested seats. The USDP fielded over 1,000 candidates, far exceeding its closest rivals' tallies. Meanwhile, the NLD, which won landslide victories in 2015 and 2020, was deregistered along with 40 other parties. Collectively, they had won 90% of legislative seats in 2020.

Aiding the USDP's dominance was the junta's introduction of a proportional representation system, replacing the first-past-the-post method that had delivered the NLD's sweeping victories. This allows the USDP to secure seats even with minimal popular support, over and above the 25% of parliamentary seats reserved for military appointees under the 2008 Constitution.

The USDP's origins lie in the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), established by Senior General Than Shwe in September 1993, just months after the regime convened a National Convention to draft Myanmar's future constitution. Than Shwe, who ruled Myanmar from 1992 to 2011, had come to power after the junta negated the NLD's triumph in multi-party elections in 1990. Officially a social organisation aimed at "national development" and "ethnic amity", the USDA was, in reality, designed to be the military's civilian arm. The USDA functioned as an organisation that conducted and promoted business under the junta's patronage.

In 2010, following the institution of a new constitution in 2008, the USDA transformed into the USDP just before elections that would bring a quasi-civilian government to power. Ex-general Thein Sein was elected president in polls boycotted by the NLD and widely derided as rigged. In genuinely contested elections in 2015 and 2020, however, the USDP suffered humiliating defeats, losing even in its stronghold of the national capital, Naypyitaw.

Strategic instrument

In a way, the USDP is a successor to the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) that ruled Myanmar under a one-party dictatorship led by Ne Win following a military coup in 1962. The BSPP was inseparable from the state and collapsed in 1988 following the popular 8888 uprising. The military seized power again through a coup, and ruled until 2011 with Than Shwe as leader.

The USDP, in contrast to the BSPP, functions as a strategic instrument within a multi-party system while the military retains ultimate power through constitutional guarantees. If the USDP loses, the military doesn't collapse; it simply uses other mechanisms to maintain control, as demonstrated by the 2021 coup. Also, unlike the BSPP's "secular" and "socialist" pretensions, the USDP seeks legitimacy in an ideological blend of Bamar and Buddhist nationalism, by aligning with radical monastic groups like MaBaTha against perceived foreign and minority threats.

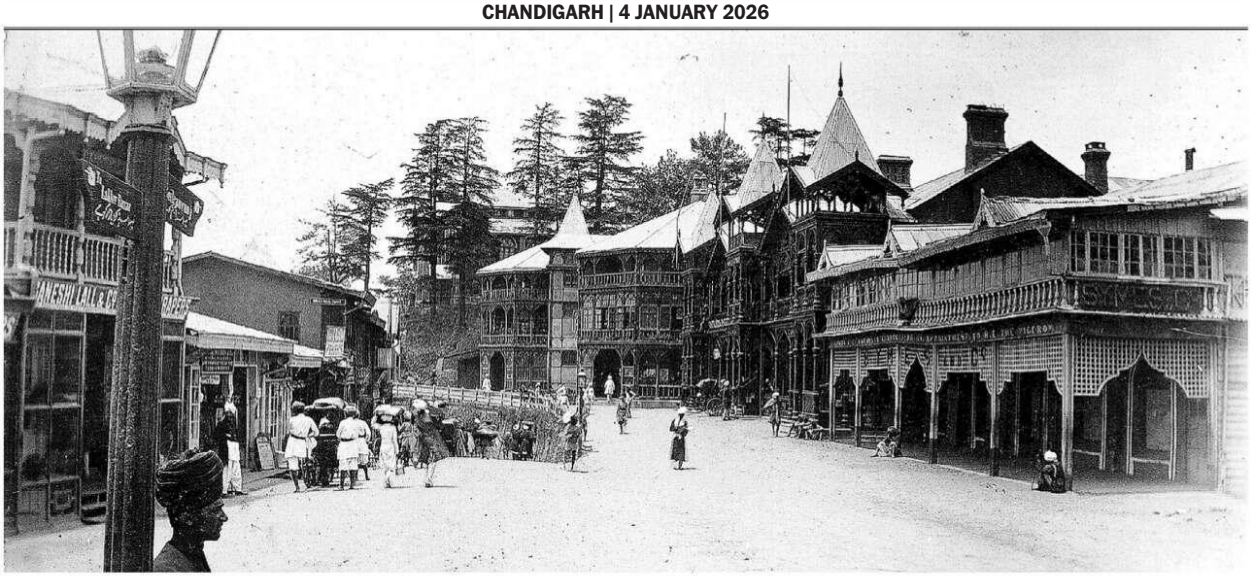
The USDP's current leader is U Khin Yi, a former senior military officer and police chief who also served as immigration minister in Thein Sein's government. Khin Yi conducted a series of pro-military rallies before the February 2021 coup, following the junta's false claim that the NLD's victory was due to fraud.

The party's candidate list for the current election is packed with generals and former ministers. The USDP now appears to be a vehicle to transition junta leader Min Aung Hlaing into a civilian presidency, providing a legal veneer to end the state of emergency declared after the coup.

The Sunday Tribune
SPECTRUM
CHANDIGARH | 4 JANUARY 2026

Deciphering the abundance of small epiphanies in Vinod Kumar Shukla's work
VARIETY PAGE 2

Two volumes reflect on democracy and its changing contours
BOOKS PAGE 4



The Mall at the Ridge by Jean Baptiste Oscar Mallitte (1829-1905). This is the spot that gathered fame later as 'Scandal Point' — which came from one of Rudyard Kipling's stories, *'The Education of Otis Yeere'*. COURTESY OF HUGH ASHLEY RAYNER AND THE PAGODA TREE PRESS, BATH, UK

Kipling in Shimla

Born 160 years ago, the author of *'Plain Tales from the Hills'* & *'Kim'* was a man of many contradictions, but the images the Nobel laureate culled are priceless

RAAJA BHASIN

ONE may not have consciously taken note of it, but there is more than a ring of truth to a colleague's casual remark in the context of Shimla: "I don't think there is any other small town in the world that has had so many famous people associated with it." Some found international fame and their legacy lives on. One such person was Rudyard Kipling, who was born 160 years ago, on December 30, 1865, and spent some formative time in Shimla.

Rudyard's father, Lockwood, had come to teach at the Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy (JJ) School of Art in Bombay where Rudyard was born. In 1871, six-year-old Rudyard and his younger sister Trix — to whom he remained devoted — were left back in England in the care of an old seafarer, Harry Holloway, and his tyrannical wife. Interestingly, the boy still couldn't read and his first language was Hindustani.

Rudyard Kipling returned to India to take up a job with an influential paper of the time, *The Civil and Military Gazette*, which was published from Lahore. He had been interviewed while still in England by the editor, Stephen Wheeler. In the passage of over a dozen years, his parents' circumstances were also much improved — financially as well as socially. His father was now the curator of the Lahore Museum and director of the Mayo School of Art. Rudyard was then some 17 years of age and sliding into the strenuous work at the *Gazette* as well as his own restless ride through the world of letters.

The following seven years that Kipling worked as a journalist before he finally left India at the age of 23 — never to return — were also spent in gathering the material for one of his most popular collection of stories, *'Plain Tales from the Hills'*, set in and around Shimla. Many of the acquaintances of those years played at least cameo roles in his writing, as have the places he saw.

In 1885, Lockwood and Alice, Rudyard's parents, decided to bring the family up to Shimla — which was declared as the summer capital of the British Raj in 1864 — for the 'Season'. The Kipling family was staying at the Tendrils, now the site of the Cecil Hotel. A couple of hundred metres away was Peterhof, the residence of the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin. Lady Dufferin developed a great liking for the family — swiftly taking them into the inner and uppermost circles of society.

In these years, Rudyard created a world whose images are with us well over a century after he first put pen to paper — part fiction, part fable and part reality. Under the deodar trees, we join in the machinations of Mrs Hauksbee, who *"…was sometimes nice to her own sex"*, while she had *"…the wisdom of the Serpent, the logical coherence of the Man, the fearlessness of Child and the triple intuition of the Woman"*.

Through Kipling's eyes and words, we are carried to the most wretched of bungalows that are located in the most godforsaken places, or in dreary cantonments — as we, the readers, quietly observe the white man revel in or collapse under his supposed burden.

The word images that the young Rudyard culled from his time in Shimla have left us with a steamy place, full of intrigue and power play. This was the town for dashing young men out to seek their fortunes. Here came the 'Grass Widows', married ladies escaping both the heat and their husbands — and quite amenable *"to a little something or a someone"* to keep them entertained though those months.

The finer specimens of the 'Fishing Fleet' wound their way up the narrow mountain paths in search of husbands; those unfortunates who sailed back to England without at least an engagement ring were termed 'returned empties'. There was the enigmatic club of 'Black Hearts' whose members could not commit the offence of living in "open matrimony". Whiffs of scandal floated as freely as Shimla's mists.

Rudyard Kipling at Shimla.
COURTESY: THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON DC, USA

There was Kim, the waif, who wandered at large through the streets and alleyways, the hills and plains — who was equally at ease in a regimental mess and in the garb of a Buddhist lama's novice as the Great Game of espionage was played out. The wide encompass of the book, *'Kim'*, published in 1901, introduces us to character after fascinating character as he passes into the legends of literature.

Sitting in the web of the Great Game is the gentle lama and the horse trader (in more ways than one), Mahbub Ali. Then there is the enigmatic Lurgan Sahib, who was based on a real-life character. *"Lurgan Sahib has a shop among the European shops. All Simla knows it. Ask there… and, Friend of all the world, he is one to be obeyed to the last wink of his eyelashes. Men say he does magic, but that should not touch thee. Go up the hill and ask. Here begins the Great Game,"* was what Mahbub Ali, the Pathan horse dealer, told the young Kim as he bundled him off to Shimla.

Of all the characters — or locales — who passed from real-life Shimla to Kipling's pages, none was as fascinating or enigmatic as AM Jacob — the inspiration for 'Lurgan Sahib'. With a compelling magnetism, Jacob arrived in Shimla in the 1870s and went into the business of gemstones and rare curios.

Fluent in many languages, Jacob was said to have harnessed the powers of the occult. Friend to some of the most powerful men in the land, he often turned "invisible" to entertain his guests. But then the time came when Jacob's star also went into eclipse and a series of events led to his financial ruin after he contracted to deliver the 'Imperial Diamond' to Sir Mahbub Ali Khan, the Nizam of Hyderabad.

The diamond has since been famous as the 'Jacob Diamond', which was bought, among other treasures of the Nizam's, in 1995 by the Government of India and is now housed in the vaults of the Reserve Bank of India. This is considered to be the world's fourth most valuable diamond.

Somewhat changed, many sites that Kipling carried into the bitter-sweet pages of *'Plain Tales from the Hills'*, his numerous poems and those casually flicked into *'Kim'* live on in today's Shimla. There is the Old Club, the wide glade of Annandale where fetes and fancy fairs were held, and Longwood Hotel, where Venus Annodomini and the audacious Mrs Hauksbee lived. With high rocky banks covered with bergenia, there is the Mashobra road where the Tertium Quid met his doom.

The building that housed Peliti's, that 'almost continental cafe', and Combermere Bridge, where the Phantom Rickshaw first accosted Jack Pansay, are all there, as are the descendants of the monkeys that removed the hairbrushes from Kipling's dressing table at his one-time residence, Northbank.

For a long time, Kipling was dismissed as a jingoist and scorned by serious writers, despite (perhaps because of) the wide popularity of his writing and the award of the Nobel Prize in 1907. He has been considered as the writer of the Raj. He has been berated for his racial attitudes, as when he wrote in *'Beyond the Pale'* — *'A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race and breed. Let the white go to the white and the black to the black."*

Through his characters and scenes, we see the writer who is all too often disparaging of India and Indians. And yet, in the United States — where Kipling lived for several years — a waiter earned his ire for speaking against Indians. Later, he wrote of the brave Indian soldiers in the trenches of the First World War. It was while living in the US that he wistfully noted in a letter to an old friend, Mrs Hill: *"I felt I was moving in a terrible homesick nightmare and as though at any moment the years would roll away and I would find myself back in India. But it is 25 years and 26 days since I left it."*

India, he felt, must be *"one's whole life or nothing"*. In *'Kim'*, it is the country that is often regarded as the chief character and not the protagonist, Kimball O' Hara. Of India, Kipling wrote: *"My first impression is of daybreak, light and colour and golden and purple fruits at the level of my shoulder. This would be the memory of the early morning walks to the Bombay fruit market with my ayah and later with my sister in her perambulator, and of our return with our purchases piled high on the bows of it. Our ayah was a Portuguese Roman Catholic who would — I beside her — pray at a wayside Cross. Meeta, my Hindu bearer, would sometimes go into little Hindu temples where, being below the age of caste, I held his hand and looked at the dimly-seen friendly Gods."*

Kipling's unique ability lay in allowing his imagination to take flight from real situations, real people and real places. Laughter and humour were very important to him, as were childhood fantasies. His childhood world and its make-believe completeness remained with him throughout his life. Ruthless with the quality of his own writing, he addressed himself to the widest possible audience — not that he has been without scores of critics. (The poem *'If'* has gone back and forth in numerous English language courses across the world).

Peliti's, the 'almost continental' cafe that found mention in Kipling's work.

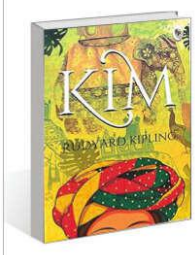
Which one of the onion layers of India was Kipling's? For that matter, which one of the onions in a large field? The flitting social world? The wicked and fatuous Shimla or the Allahabad (today's Prayagraj) of *'Rikki-Tikki-Tavi'*?

If he gushed only in spurts about the land of his birth, that was his business. Yet India was a subject that provided a wealth of material — and in all likelihood this was a childhood fancy come alive and he wrote fable on it some more. He may have unravelled some part of the complexity of India and while he was at it, added a measure of the complexity — and even clarity — of his own vision. There is remarkable sympathy for the Indian peasant as when he wrote in *'Masque of Plenty'*, that was sparked by famine:

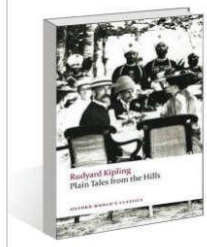
At his heart is his daughter's wedding,
In his eyes the foreknowledge of debt.
He eats and hath indigestion,
He toils and may not stop;
His life is a long drawn question
Between a crop and a crop.

At times Kipling delights; at times makes the blood boil; at times he seems so very trivial and yet remains so very readable. He seems to walk with a pointed walking stick, finds and prods a piece of life lying on the road and then marches off with it for observation and dissection under a bitter-sweet pen. Perhaps he intended it to be so.

— The writer is an author based in Shimla



Published in 1901, *'Kim'* presents a vivid picture of India.



'Plain Tales from the Hills' is a collection of short stories, published in 1888, on the British colonial life.

Quiet heroism of a doctor who never took leave

STANZIN SHAKYA

NOT all heroes wear capes. Some roll up their sleeves and serve in silence, easing pain, saving lives, and asking nothing in return. In Ladakh, that hero is Dr Tsering Norbu, known fondly as Dr Norbu Olthangpa, a surgeon who's become synonymous with selfless service in one of the harshest and most remote regions of India.

My father was born in 1941 in Nimoo village, 35 km west of Leh, into a pastoral family. Growing up in Ladakh's unforgiving climate and vast isolation was no easy task. Education was almost non-existent, limited to a handful of villages.

He completed his primary schooling in the village school, learning to write on a wooden board blackened with soot from the kitchen *chullah* (called *thab* in Ladakhi). Pens were fashioned from willow branches, and ink was made from *multani mitti* paste.

After primary school, he had to walk 35 km to Leh to continue his studies. There were no hostels or boarding schools, so he stayed with relatives, helping with household chores. Barely in his teens, he cooked his own meals while studying. Visiting his parents on weekends was impossible — the journey on foot was arduous, and even with a horse, it required camping twice in the open.

A young Dr Norbu (right) examining patients on a visit to Nubra village. PHOTO COURTESY: THE WRITER

Dr Norbu Olthangpa's lifetime of selfless service helped heal Ladakh when medical care barely existed

"As a child, I never dreamt of becoming a doctor. I just wanted a job," he would later say.

After completing Class 10, he travelled to Srinagar for higher education. He earned his BSc and then pursued MBBS. To support himself financially, he sang traditional Ladakhi songs on All India Radio, Kashmir. Returning home during vacations was a luxury he could not afford, and communication with his parents was limited to occasional letters — sometimes only two or three in an entire year. From Class 11 until the completion of his MBBS, he never visited his parents. When he finally returned home after graduating, his parents did not recognise him.

With his hard-earned degree, he had only one desire: to serve the people of Ladakh. At the time, healthcare in the region was abysmal. The district hospital in Leh was a 20-bed facility with no specialists, meagre equipment, and most cases were referred either to the Army Hospital in Leh or all the way to Srinagar. After losing his first son during childbirth, Dr Norbu resolved to specialise in surgery. In 1975, he returned to Srinagar to pursue his Masters in Surgery, completing it in 1978. (That same year, his wife delivered me alone at home in Ladakh, without medical assistance — still grieving the loss of their firstborn.) Following his MS, he was posted at District Hospital, Leh.

There was no electricity, no proper operation theatre, no life-support systems, no anaesthetist, and no diagnostic facilities — just rudimentary instruments. Dr Norbu relied entirely on clinical examination to diagnose and operate, determined to spare patients the perilous journey to Srinagar. Wood and coal stoves heated the operation theatre; handheld torches often provided light.

Immediately upon his return in 1978, he performed two caesarean sections, personally heating the room with coal stoves, administering anaesthesia, and conducting the surgeries himself while nurses held torches overhead.

When asked why he did not pursue further studies, his answer was simple: he could not leave. Patients needed him. Medical services were so scarce that doctors treated every ailment, regardless of speciality. From the start of his service until retirement, Dr Norbu performed six to eight surgeries a week. Over his career, he carried out more than 10,000 major and minor surgeries. It is often said that there is not a single family in Ladakh whose member has not been treated by Dr Norbu.

He seemed perpetually alert, as though waiting for someone to call his name. Day or night, if he heard his name being shouted, he would rise and leave immediately. Our home became an informal charity clinic. Patients arrived knowing he would never charge any fee — many brought local butter or cheese; the poorest offered only a *khataq*, the traditional white scarf of goodwill.

Throughout my childhood, I remember only one brief leave he ever took — a pilgrimage to Buddhist shrines in Bihar. Otherwise, he never rested, never called in sick, never made time for himself. From the start of his service until 2002, he did not take a single day of leave, except that one journey. When asked why, he replied that his absence cost lives — during that brief leave, a few patients had passed away. Though he officially retired in 1999, his services were extended until 2002.

He received several honours, including a silver medal from the J&K Government, the Rural Surgeons Award, and Ladakh's first Spalgnam Tuston Award.

Yet he always maintained: "I am grateful for the awards, but I did not work for recognition. My duty was towards the people of Ladakh."

Even after retirement, he worked for many years at the Mahabodhi Charitable Hospital, Leh. Now 85, he lives a contented life in Leh, but all day long locals still keep visiting him for advice.

Two decades after he laid down his scalpel, the mere mention of Dr Tsering Norbu's name still stirs emotion in Ladakh — among the young and the old alike.

— The writer is a CRPF Commandant

There is an abundance of small epiphanies in Vinod Kumar Shukla's work

Extraordinary in the ordinary

AMIT DUTTA

A GREAT writer like Vinod Kumar Shukla performs a rare double movement. While leading the readers into unfamiliar and newly imagined spaces, he also draws them closer to their own inner life. This inward and outward motion gives literature its peculiar intimacy. It is felt most strongly during one's formative years when reading becomes a mode of self-recognition as much as discovery. For me, this experience was inseparable from reading him.

What distinguishes Vinod*ji*'s (as we called him) work is its abundance of small epiphanies. These moments arrive gently and alter one's perception almost without effort. Through them, the reader is brought closer to the essence of living itself. His writing deepens one's sense of the mystery of life without pretending to resolve it. To sustain such openness and to resist explanation while remaining lucid is a demanding achievement. He accomplishes it with equal grace in poetry and prose.

His writing carries a pristine visual clarity, a rhythm of attention and a patient gaze that feels inherently cinematic. These scattered memories and reflections return to me now as a single coherent impression of a writer who enlarges the reader's world, while simultaneously allowing them to find their place within it.

One of Vinod*ji*'s other most significant achievements lies in his ability to reveal the extraordinary within the ordinary, while maintaining a careful distance from the pathology of both self and society. He does not psychologise excessively, nor does he burden his work with moral judgment. The world appears as it is, observed with care and restraint. In his life and writing, there is a rare balance between involvement and detachment that is a way of being present without possession.

This quality runs through his work as a rigorous discipline. Its formal restraint aligns with the cinema of Robert Bresson and I believe this was the real attraction for many filmmakers at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune. I have a hunch that Mani Kaul, a great admirer of Bresson, was drawn to Vinod*ji*'s work for the same reason because it allowed tenderness without sentimentality and insight without intrusion.

In reading him, one learns how to see the world anew, with attention, and at the same time how to stand back from it with dignity. This creates the conditions for a rare form of compassion, one that slowly dissolves the hard boundaries between self and other, friend and adversary.

Another distinctive aspect of his writing is its subtle sense of humour, a slightly oblique wit. Consider the opening line of his short story *'Aadmi Ki Aurat'*:

Bageeche tak main Jayanath ke saath aise chala tha, jaise Jayanath ke saath nahin chal raha tha

(I walked with Jayanath up to the garden in such a way that it felt as if I was not walking with Jayanath at all.)

Two opposing ideas sit together in this single sentence: companionship and distance, presence and absence. This kind of tension recurs across his writing. In Indian aesthetical thought, such an oblique mode of expression is valued as *vakrokti*, a figure of speech in which what is directly stated points toward something that remains unseen. Here, meaning arises from suggestion rather than assertion.

The poet or writer introduces a slight strangeness, a turn in expression, through which a deeper perception becomes possible. This turn, the *vakra*, is held in high regard. At times, Vinod*ji* repeats a sentence with a small variation yet each repetition carries a fresh inflection. The effect is a *sukshma anubhuti*, a finely shaded experience rather than a dramatic shift. Perhaps most striking is his ability to create an aesthetic of absence (*abhav*) both materially and philosophically.

Through his expression, he makes space for what remains unexpressed, allowing two opposite emotions to arise simultaneously. At the same time, he writes from within a middle class or lower middle class world and is deeply attentive to what is available, modest, and ordinary. Within this economy of means he finds beauty without denying the *karuna*, the inevitable pathos inseparable from being alive. There is this frequent accusation that he did not read other writers or that he showed little interest in the fashionable currents of world literature. This puzzled and sometimes amused his colleagues, and I found this puzzlement revealing.

The writing of Jnanpith Award winner Vinod Kumar Shukla, who passed away on December 23 last year in Raipur, carries a pristine visual clarity. PTI

Clockwise from above, left: *'Aakash Dharti ko Khatkhataata Hai'*, *'Naukar ki Kameez'*, *'Sab Kuchh Hona Bacha Rahega'* & *'Mahavidyalaya'*.

I think one of the least noted aspects of any discussion of Vinod Kumar Shukla is his mother's influence on him and her role in shaping his writing.

He once took a poem to his mother and admitted that it contained a few lines from an older poem by Bhavani Prasad Mishra, absorbed unconsciously. His mother replied that just as she kept separate *chhanniyan* (sieves) in her kitchen for different purposes, he too should keep a *mann ki chhannani* (an inner sieve of the mind) so that no other writer's lines or ideas entered his work unawares.

This discipline, which he followed throughout his life, was a way of protecting attention and it is this practice that gave his writing its uniqueness.

Long before he entered wider public recognition, Vinod*ji* was already a revered presence at FTII. His stature there, of course, owed much to our teacher Mani Kaul, whose two films based on his writing, *'Naukar Ki Kameez'* and the short film *'Bhoj'*, revealed how naturally Vinod*ji*'s prose lends itself to cinema.

Mani *Sahab* later showed me his script based on *'Deewar Mein Ek Khidki Rehti Thi'* (he sadly could not realise it because of his untimely demise). In my conversations with Vinod*ji*, I could sense the affection and respect he had for Mani *Sahab* and how deeply disheartened he was that the film could never be made.

In 2009, I was invited by the acting batch at FTII to conduct a workshop film. During the preparatory phase, we read a wide range of stories together. From these, we chose two by Vinod*ji*: *'Aadmi Ki Aurat'* and *'Ped Par Kamra'*. After the film was completed, I had the good fortune to speak with him several times on the phone. What I noticed was that his own voice was strikingly close to the voice of his writing: gentle, attentive, a bit distant but deeply compassionate.

— The writer is an acclaimed filmmaker

CAPTION CONTEST 1543

HIMANSHU MAHAJAN

Entries are invited to suggest a caption for the photograph. The caption should only be in English, witty and not exceeding 10 words, and reach Spectrum, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 160030, by Thursday. The best five captions will be published and awarded ₹300, ₹250, ₹200, ₹150 and ₹100, respectively. Each caption must be accompanied by a clipping of the caption contest and its number. Photocopies or scans of the caption photo won't be accepted. Online subscribers may attach an epaper clipping at captionpics@tribunemail.com or a scanned copy of the e-paper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number, along with your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR **CAPTION CONTEST 1542**

SPECTRUM DECEMBER 28 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Glass hoppers — Sanjeev Trikha via epaper, Fatehabad

Exploring every (b)angle — Vineet Gupta, Jagadhri

A wristful of happiness — Deepender Singh Gill via epaper, Kaithal

Selection in progress — Gaganpreet Singh via epaper, Mohali

(G)lass touch — Adit Kansal, Nalagarh

Tribal food is light on the stomach, nourishing, and layered with quiet complexity

A cuisine shaped by collective memory

NISHANT CHOUBEY

TRIBAL cuisine is not a trend, a novelty, or a rediscovered 'superfood' narrative. It is one of the oldest living food systems of the Indian subcontinent, shaped by forests, seasons, rituals, and collective memory. Long before recipes were written or ingredients commercialised, indigenous food evolved as an intimate response to land, climate, and survival. Every ingredient had a purpose. Every method carried meaning. Nothing was wasted, and nothing existed outside nature.

Cooking techniques are simple yet profoundly intelligent. Roasting in leaves, slow cooking in earthen pots, fermenting for preservation, sun-drying, and smoking over wood fires are common practices. These methods do more than cook food — they enhance nutrition, improve digestibility, and extend shelf life without chemicals or refrigeration.

Sal leaves, *mahua* flowers, bamboo, forest stones and ash are not accessories but active elements of the cooking process.

Flavours are built with restraint and respect. Spices are minimal, not due to scarcity, but because ingredients are allowed to speak for themselves. Sourness comes from fermented grains or wild berries, bitterness from forest greens, sweetness from *mahua* flowers or seasonal fruits, and heat from indigenous chilies.

Oils are used sparingly, traditionally extracted from *mahua*, *sal* seeds, or mustard. The result is food that is light on the stomach, it is deeply nourishing, and is layered with quiet complexity.

Across Jharkhand and Central India, custodians of this knowledge continue to preserve and interpret these foodways. Jharkhand represents 32 different tribes.

Spaces such as The Open Field, led by Dr Manisha Oraon and Abhishke who are showcasing the best tribal food, along with initiatives like Ajam Emba nurtured by Aruna Tirkey, play a vital role in presenting tribal cuisine with integrity — allowing ingredients, stories, and techniques to remain rooted rather than stylised.

Equally important are younger voices like those of Alisha Oraon, who represent a new generation carrying ancestral food knowledge forward with pride, sensitivity, and purpose.

At a time when modern food systems are struggling with sustainability, tribal cuisine offers clear answers. It is climate-resilient by design, dependent on biodiversity rather than monoculture. It supports local livelihoods, respects ecosystems, and generates almost no waste.

Most importantly, it reminds us that good food does not need excess processing, packaging, or performance. It needs understanding.

— The writer is a celebrity chef

MADUA-SAL PATTA ROTI WITH KUDRUM CHUTNEY

PHOTO COURTESY: DR MANISHA ORAON

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE *ROTI*	
Madua (finger millet/ragi) flour	2 cups
Warm water	As required
Salt	To taste
Fresh *sal* leaves (cleaned and wiped)	6-8
FOR THE *KUDRUM* BASE	
Kudrum (roselle — boiled, crushed)	250 gm
Garlic cloves (lightly crushed)	4
Green chillies	1-2
Mahua or mustard oil	2 tsp
Jaggery	To taste
Salt	To taste

METHOD

- In a bowl, mix *madua (ragi)* flour and salt. Gradually add warm water and gently knead into a soft, pliable dough. *Madua* behaves differently from wheat, so avoid over-kneading. Rest for 10 minutes.
- Divide the dough into small portions and flatten each into a thick disc using your palms.
- Place each disc on to a *sal* leaf and gently press so it adheres.
- Heat an iron *tawa* or a heavy pan. Place the *roti* leaf-side down on low flame. Cover and cook slowly, allowing the aroma of the *sal* leaf to infuse the bread. Flip and cook the other side until firm and cooked through.
- For the *kudrum (roselle/sour winter fruit)* base/*chutney*: Heat oil in a pan. Add garlic and green chillies, saute briefly, then add crushed *kudrum*, jaggery, and salt. Cook for a few minutes until well combined and earthy in flavour.
- Serve the *madua–sal patta roti* hot with the *kudrum* base.

IMAGEIN
A PHOTOGRAPH EXPLAINED

VANTAGE POINT

AS a regular combat officer, I was trained for warfighting, leadership, and operations. But over the years, one skill — photography — began to define my service in an entirely unexpected way. What started as a hobby became a calling. The Indian Navy was the first to recognise this, and I soon found myself photographing not just for the Navy, but for the Army, the Air Force, and the paramilitary forces of India.

Capt Navtej Singh (Retd)

For over three decades, I served in uniform — as a soldier, and as a visual chronicler of the Indian Armed Forces. I've flown in most of the combat aircraft operated by the Navy and the IAF. I've stood at the forecastle of warships during rough seas, camera in hand, drenched by waves, holding steady for that perfect frame. I've been burnt by the heat of afterburners while capturing fighters taking off at full thrust. I've hung out of helicopters to document fleet manoeuvres, with one hand on the airframe and the other on the shutter. I was often reprimanded by fleet commanders for taking risks they deemed excessive — but not once did they hold me back. I was engulfed by passion. I rarely thought of personal safety. I just chased the frame because I believed in what it could do. I wasn't there to take pretty pictures. I was there to document the spirit of the Indian Armed Forces, to capture moments that would otherwise go unseen. Moments of courage, fatigue, precision, tension, humanity — and sometimes, triumph.

Even today, long after I stepped away from uniformed service, the camera remains close. The battlefield may have changed, but my passion for photography hasn't. I continue to seek out the unseen, the remote, the real — documenting lives, landscapes, and cultures across India with the same dedication and love that once took me to the decks of warships and the cockpits of fighters. This was never a career. It was never a designation. It was a way of life.

— Capt Navtej Singh is a retired Naval officer & photographer

(Column curated by Aditya Arya, director of Museo Camera, Gurugram)

Tracing legacies of classical music at the recent 150th Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan in Jalandhar

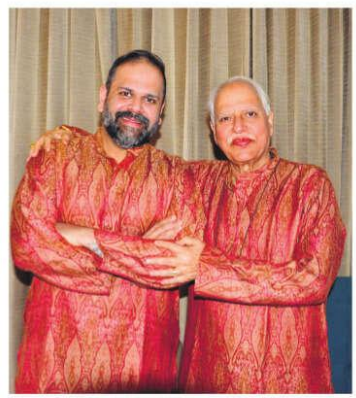
MASTERS OF MELODY

APARNA BANERJI

ON bone-chilling December nights each year, when most of Punjab is asleep, an oasis in the heart of Jalandhar remains lit and throbbing till the early hours of the morning, with notes from the age-old Indian musical traditions reverberating.

Bred on stories of the world's oldest continuous Hindustani classical music festival, Indian maestros consider a call from Baba Harivallabh an honour. Thus, attending the 150th edition of the Shree Baba Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan in Jalandhar were practitioners of music across *gharanas* and disciplines. We speak to some of them on how they make sense of music in the Indian subcontinent today.

Vocalist Pt Sanjeev Abhyankar's performance brought the curtains down on the 150th edition of Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan.



Pt Sajan Mishra (R) with son Swaransh. TRIBUNE PHOTOS: MALKIAT SINGH

Celloist Saskia Rao and sitarist Pt Shubhendra Rao. (Right) For Malini Awasthi, coming to Harivallabh evoked memories of her *guru*, Girija Devi.

FOLK ESSENCE

Soaked in the song and soil of the rustic plains of Benaras, Malini Awasthi wears the badge of 'Folk Queen of India' with pride. In doing so, she is fulfilling the promise she made to her *guru*, Girija Devi, to uphold classical traditions. But the spirited and fierce vocalist also politely cautions the more puritanical ones in the musical community to not cast folk and classical music traditions in separate compartments, lest they end up obstructing the flow of music.

Speaking about the intricate rustic traditions of Benaras and *Purab Ang*, bestowed upon her by her *guru*, Awasthi says, "I bow to my *guru;* Harivallabh was her beloved stage and I grew up listening to stories about it."

A flagbearer of the folk tradition, she says the specialty of Benaras and *Purab Ang* is that folk traditions are as revered as *Dhrupad, Dhamar, Khayal* or *Tappa*. These traditions will never die, she believes. "Firstly, because it's all archived and secondly, because it's reinterpreted, composed, and sung in different ways by different artists."

Awasthi says the thing about folk traditions is that those who haven't experienced these won't be able to reflect it in their work. "Those who haven't lived in a village, those who have never seen a *sugna* (pet parrot), or have never been delighted by the sounds of a *kaga* (crow) piercing the silence on their roof's *munder* (ledge), how will they understand that the call of a crow heralds a visitor? How will they sing *'Ja more kaga, pi ki khabar la, sone ki chonch marvaungi'* (Go, my crow, bring word of my beloved, I'll gild your beak with gold)?" Benaras, she proudly says, has still preserved this spirit.

A NEW *JUGALBANDI*

"Vani Ishwar hai. Swar bigad jaye to tu-tu main-main ho jaati hai" (Sound is God; when *swara* goes off, it causes contention).

The *raga* summons and the *raga* blesses; without the *raga's 'ahvaan'* (invitation), singing has no meaning, says Benaras *gharana* legend Pt Sajan Mishra. He hadn't been to Harivallabh ever since losing his brother Pt Rajan Mishra. As he returns to the festival, he is excited about the new musical bond kindled with his son Swaransh.

"Pt Rajan Mishra's passing away was a shock; it almost thrust me into silence. I thought to myself, 'Now what's left in life?' I would keep looking at his portrait in my room. One day, his voice spoke to me: 'Don't give up singing. If you keep singing, I'll stay alive with you.' Swaransh was Pt Rajan Mishra's *'ganda shishya'*. I asked him to join me. Earlier inclined towards Bollywood, he was destined to sing with me."

On Benaras, his *'janmabhoomi'* and *'karmabhoomi'*, he says: "The specialty of Benaras is that it was named by God. Benaras is full of *'rasa'* (essence). It is said that sound has sprung from Shiva's pellet drum, and that the five *ragas* emerged from his mouth. Kashi is Shiva's ancient city — the only town in the world that has never been ruined or marauded. Benaras finds mention in the *Vedas* and *Puranas*. And it has been designated the 'City of Music' by UNESCO. Why? Because there has been a continuity in music here. From ancient *Chand, Prabandh, Nibandh* styles to *Dhrupad, Khayal, Tappa, Thumri, Kajri, Chaiti* — it has such a huge canvas." He says Benaras is the only *gharana* where all three disciplines exist: singing, instrumental and dance.

MUSICAL HIGH

"To be an artiste means to be apolitical and bring out the most positive of human values. We always have one message: unity. Bringing together every caste, creed, colour... because music has no religion. Music is a universal language that binds the world," says Maihar *gharana* sitarist Pt Shubhendra Rao, who performed at the festival with his wife, cello virtuoso Saskia Rao-de Haas.

Just last month, they performed a special concert with Joan Lainez (tenor) at the UN General Assembly. They brought to life the iconic composition that Shubhendra's *guru*, Pt Ravi Shankar, had delivered in 1967 along with Yehudi Menuhin at the UN General Assembly in New York. In November, they performed in front of the Ellora caves to celebrate 80 years of UNESCO.

Talking about the collaboration with Lainez, Saskia says, "Performing with the famous tenor from Spain, we recreated some really masterful western classical music. We had met barely hours ago, but it was an exchange of music and culture with an openness to listen and learn from each other."

Saskia came to India from Amsterdam 30 years ago. Over the years, she has created a special place for herself in Indian classical music. On how she perceives the demarcation between Indian and western music after all these years, she says: "I was 18 when I came to India. My music and expression are Indian classical. As a composer, I lean back on the knowledge I gained in my childhood and have built my practice on that. At Harivallabh, I honour tradition. That said, when we compose or collaborate with artistes across cultures, it is nice to be bilingual musically."

How to make democracy truly participatory

AVIJIT PATHAK

I AM reflecting on these two volumes edited by Aruna Roy and Suchi Pande at a time when, to use Antonio Gramsci's prophetic phrase, "the pessimism of the intellect" haunts me. I witness the degeneration of democracy into some sort of electoral autocracy. And despite the ritualisation of periodic elections, I see the growing disempowerment of people. Under these circumstances, these two volumes, which emerged out of two conferences held in Canada and India, make me think. I too ask: Is it possible to save democracy, make it truly participatory, and create a world where the voices of the subaltern matter?

Indeed, the 26 insightful essays these two volumes contain activate my critical thinking. Take, for instance, the question Moyukh Chatterjee has raised in his essay: Why is the "politics of exposure" not working anymore? Even though we are aware of the violence implicit in the Hindu supremacist doctrine of hyper-nationalism, what ought to perplex us is that such a non-democratic doctrine continues to look "so pervasive to large numbers of people across the social divisions of caste, language, class, religion and gender".

As Chatterjee aptly explains, "The current Hindu nationalist regime is actually revealing the dark side of democracy, its potential to become… the tyranny of the majority."

Likewise, as Sohini Sengupta has analysed, a "new politics of voice" seems to have emerged in the age of digital media. For instance, as her research indicates, a 140-character negative post about Muslim refugees on Twitter (now X) can become 'viral' instantly, and evoke strong emotions. In fact, as Vipul Mudgal's rigorous essay suggests, fake news or organised disinformation looks "more believable than real news"! It is, therefore, not surprising that, as he writes, "some of our media organisations were paid heavily for promoting the right-wing Hindu agenda during the 2019 national elections, denying the opponents their rightful coverage".

Under these circumstances, can democracy be truly vibrant and participatory? As Patrick Heller cautions us, in this age of "reactive democracies", there is chronic fear among the minorities whether they can prove their citizenship. Moreover, what counts as 'public affairs' — say, welfare policies — has been "sharply compromised by a sway of market forces". Even amid this darkness, there is a domain of possibilities. As TM Thomas Issac's essay suggests, People's Plan Campaign (PPC) — the decentralisation programme in Kerala — has done reasonably well to enable "greater participation and deliberation in the local decision-making process". Yes, a project of participatory democracy, argues Mamta Jaitly, needs to include the excluded.

UNPACKING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE VOL I & VOL II
Edited by Aruna Roy and Suchi Pande.
Orient BlackSwan.
Pages 352 | Pages 280
₹725 | ₹610

However, as Nikhil Dey and Rakshita Swamy remind us, unless political democracy is nurtured by social democracy, there will always be a danger. This reminds me of what Prabhat Patnaik has written in the Preface to one of these volumes. While recalling Ambedkar, he cautions us that without social democracy, the local self-government institutions cannot be free from "the influence of the ruthlessly hierarchical caste-centric old village community". Moreover, what Teesta Setalvad characterises as "institutional amnesia" is an obstacle to the growth of participatory democracy. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the "absence of institutional memory". This absence, Teesta argues convincingly, "plagues Indian institutions of governance, especially when it comes to addressing the systemic failures caused by cycles of targeted violence".

The range of issues that these two volumes have covered — from the fiscal distribution of justice to the wisdom of pastoral peoples; or, from Shaheen Annam's essay on Bangladesh to Rajesh Veeraraghavan's reflection on whether information can make the subaltern speak — is truly amazing.

In this context, let me refer to two refreshingly creative essays written by TM Krishna and Shiv Visvanathan. What distinguishes Krishna's essay on 'Culture and Democracy' is that, despite his privileged location in the traditions of classical music, he has not forgotten to remind us that "culture has to introspect about its own contradictions, and about exclusion and discrimination". Hence, writes Krishna, it is important to "construct a nuanced cultural conversation between these graded cultural sections of society". Likewise, as opposed to the prevalent politics of knowledge that privileges techno-science and devalues people's experiential knowledge/folk wisdom, Visvanathan pleads for some kind of "knowledge panchayat" as "democracy's antidote to technocracy and majoritarianism".

Thank you, Aruna Roy and Suchi Pande for offering us these two volumes at a time when we need to move from the "pessimism of the intellect" to what Gramsci would have categorised as the "optimism of the will".

— The reviewer taught sociology at JNU

Philosophy of farewell

ARADHIKA SHARMA

GOODBYES come in many shades — tender, resigned, even violent — and Ravi Shankar Etteth's latest collection reflects them all with unflinching honesty. From the opening lines, the book signals its refusal to romanticise parting. The foreword begins with a stark confession: "I walked to the ICU and saw my dead mother from the corner of my left eye and couldn't bring myself to look at her. I still find it hard to turn my head to the left because then I will see her. Dead. I will say goodbye to her one day if someone helps me look left at last." This haunting passage sets the tone for a work that probes the struggle to confront loss.

THE LITTLE BOOK OF GOODBYES
by Ravi Shankar Etteth.
Westland.
Pages 124.
₹299

The stories move beyond grief to explore the many dimensions of farewell — between loved ones, places, and selves. They trace fragile intimacies that bind generations and the unpredictable ties between lovers, friends, and even objects. Autobiographical in nature, the book reframes goodbye not only as the loss of loved ones but as the fading of innocence and letting go of people, pets, and places. There is whimsicality and unease, flashes of tenderness, and at times, a whisper of the otherworldly. Cruelty, too, surfaces.

In 'A Dragonfly Story', the author observes: "I believe that most children aren't nice… Worst of all, they can be mindlessly cruel." The story recounts how, as a boy, he shatters orphan Mani's illusion that dragonflies are ancestral souls — a deliberate unkindness that leaves him with guilt that never fades.

Some stories speak of death — at times, brutal. 'The Parable of Thomas and John' tells of his great-grandfather, who converted to Christianity, renamed himself Thomas, and descended into madness. 'The Jesus Tree' is the narrative of a priest, his wife, and her brigand lover: haunting, seething with passion and tragedy. Others, like 'The Gene that Guards Us', which recounts Fang, his grandfather's loyal dog who perished saving his master, are tender in tone. Later, Etteth adopts a dog named Bosky and becomes convinced that Bosky is Fang reborn.

'Beloved Strangers' recalls a fleeting love, immortalised by a kiss on Brooklyn Bridge in the shadow of 9/11, while Naina's heartbreaking story in 'The Girl with the Red Rose' lingers long after it ends. Naturally, the pandemic finds its way into the book; Etteth reveals that he lost his father to Covid.

The collection is peopled with vivid characters: Nonayan Master, the schoolteacher who insisted Annie Besant could not give a speech because she forgot English; Ramaswamy, the grandfather's orderly — revealed to be far more than a mere menial — who departs to bid farewell to his own family; arsonists turned lovers; gold-laden grandmothers; priests and pandits. It provokes and entertains, refusing sentimentality.

Etteth's philosophical arc is striking. He moves from dismantling the myth of closure in 'The Mother in the Gallery', affirming the endless continuity of human bonds, to contemplating the ethics of farewell in 'The Passer-By', where he writes: "Be the man you always wanted to be when you close your eyes to the light. There is no better gift you can give yourself than saying goodbye to unfinished business without guilt." This shift — from rejecting closure as fantasy to embracing the grace of release — anchors the book's deeper inquiry into how we negotiate endings.

The final section, 'The Sufi', offers brief philosophical parables and is a fitting close to a well-crafted work that moves with ease between memory and myth, intimacy and metaphysics. Etteth reminds us that goodbyes are never simple; they are layered acts of courage, clarity, and sometimes cruelty.

This collection does not promise closure. It offers something rarer: the wisdom to live with continuity, and the grace to let go.

— The reviewer is a contributor based in Chandigarh

A story of all lovers

SONYA J NAIR

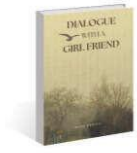
WHY does one write? Some say it is a form of self-expression. Some others say it is for the edification of the world. Whatever be the reason, writing that is honest, all bones bared, always endures. The proof? 'Dialogue with a Girl Friend' by the renowned scholar Harjeet Singh Gill. The book has been edited by Prof Anuradha Ghosh and Taizeem Bilal.

Apparently, the idea came about while celebrating the 90th birthday of Dr Gill. It is no simple thing to undertake a task of this magnitude. To take a work and visualise it so vividly takes dedication, direction and love, and the two editors have these in ample measure. The foreword by Johan Raskin says it all when he writes, "The poet seemed to read my mind and my heart as well if not better than I read it myself… It's a homage to the human imagination which gives it a kind of universality unbound by national and international boundaries and walls."

Gill's work can be treated as one long poem or as many little poems. The splits between the poems are all titled 'And Another Day', signalling the ways life can meld into a slab of memory or can simultaneously shatter into several chapters. Gill muses on the many aspects of love. He strips it down to the basics without the metaphysics — he talks about lovers meeting, holding hands, the mechanics of what makes the cogs of love move; in short, the functioning parts of love that later become memories. The dialogue is an ongoing one — both interior and exterior.

Like the motions of thought, Gill's verses move from embraces to political upheavals and crimes against humanity in one fell swoop. He talks about love on politically charged campuses in the midst of chanting for liberty. He writes about love on the campuses and in the streets of Paris in 1968. One of the interesting facets of the book is the sheer range of knowledge the poet presents. Being an academician and a scholar well-versed in the tenets of Sikhism, Gill brings the full force of his intellect in his lines. He says,

For both Baba Nanak and Rousseau
this degradation must be stopped.
neither Nature or Culture
allows any discrimination,
any inequality.



DIALOGUE WITH A GIRL FRIEND
by Harjeet Singh Gill.
Books, etc.
Pages 80.
₹599

Elsewhere, Franz Fanon and other eminent writers walk through the lines. The poet refers to himself as It, thus achieving the ultimate victory over the self. He speaks of how when a work is written, the person becomes the book, the book becomes an object. Upon deeper reflection, one understands the trajectory as that which represents human relationships and the life of a person as well. The gradual yet perceptible changes that come from familiarity or longevity.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair says in her afterword, "It tells the story of all lovers pared down to the basics. That is its singular achievement."

One finally understands that 'Dialogue With A Girl Friend' is Gill's way of paying his respects to his late wife. It is an ultimate testament of his love.

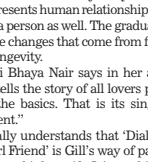
One feels a sense of respect for the book. It is a deceptively simple read. It lulls the reader into thinking that it speaks of the lover's gaze over steaming cups of coffee, an occasional hug or kiss and then gradually eases us into thinking about mortality, the fragility of love, the philosophies we live by, intolerance, extremism and finally the idea of what keeps us alive or tells us we are alive: "I love, therefore I am."

— The reviewer teaches at All Saints' College, Thiruvananthapuram

BACKFLAP

GUARDIANS OF THE REPUBLIC
by Ashwani Kumar.
Om Books.
Pages 288. ₹595

This book presents a perspective on the failings and possibilities of Indian democracy. At a time when constitutional values are tested by power struggles, polarisation and public disillusionment, eminent lawyer, author and veteran parliamentarian Dr Ashwani Kumar invites readers to look beyond headlines and reflect on the deeper issues, exploring the meaning of liberty, equality and justice in everyday life.



95 DAMS THAT REVOLUTIONISED FOOD PRODUCTION IN INDIA
by RN Malik.
Pages 148.

When Pandit Nehru became PM, he knew that the backbone of a nascent economy would be agriculture and its backbone would be the adequate supply of irrigation water and electrical energy. This book is a short introduction of the 95 dams built in post-Independence India.

Untold saga of the courtesan who enchanted Dagh Dehlvi

YOUSUF SAEED

AT a time when composite cultural identities, art, and literature are increasingly being pushed aside by exclusive and religion-based identities or historical narratives in India, the publication of any writing that celebrates marginalised chronicles and cultural histories must be welcomed. Tarana Husain Khan's new novel, "The Courtesan, Her Lover and I', is an enriching addition to the growing works of historical fiction that explore Indo-Muslim literary traditions.

Many of us who read and enjoy classical Urdu poetry try to decipher the meanings and intent of the standalone couplets in today's context and find them relevant. But what most of us don't get to learn is about the life of the 18th- or 19th-century poets who wrote those verses, or the times they lived in. What were the muses and anxieties in their lives that inspired the passions and nuances of romance they penned? This lack of historical context occurs mostly because their biographies were either not written, or are inaccessible to the non-Urdu readers.

Mainstream history writing, too, focuses mostly on political conquests, ignoring the cultural nuances. While some famed poets like Mirza Ghalib have been celebrated through popular cinema and television, the lives of other equally great *shayars* such as Dagh Dehlvi have not been documented well. Tarana Khan's novel bridges this gap at least for Dagh, a 19th-century poet who was a key figure of the Dabistan-e Dilli (the Delhi school) of Urdu poetry. But this is not an ordinary biography. It is a slow-moving and culturally rich tale of two individuals separated by a couple of centuries: the story's character and the storyteller herself.

Like many poets of his time, Dagh's life depended on royal patrons or *nawabs* in Delhi, Rampur, and Hyderabad where he lived or was invited. In Rampur, he was besotted by a *tawaif* or courtesan, Munni Bai 'Hijab', a poetess who arrived from Calcutta to attend Jashn-e Benazir, an annual festival of arts and poetry. Dagh, then in his fifties, fell in love with the young enchantress, whose

THE COURTESAN, HER LOVER AND I
by Tarana Husain Khan.
Hachette India.
Pages 336.
₹699

priority obviously was the *nawab* or his courtier who invited her. Thus started a tale of pining, jealousy, loving, and the pain of separation between them, most of which has come to us via Urdu verses and letters that Dagh wrote to Hijab.

But the novel doesn't simply transcribe the letters to tell a 19th-century story — these are being discovered in 21st century Rampur by Rukmini, an upcoming author married to a Muslim, Faraz. The two stories progress side by side, intertwining with their own complexities and nuances.

While Rukmini has to mingle with her highbrow friends in Rampur, some of whom help her develop her research and story, Hijab has the pressure to deal with her richer 'clients' in Calcutta and Rampur while negotiating her affair with Dagh.

The way Rukmini slowly discovers Rampur's past, its literary heritage and the delicious food recipes, by visiting the famed Raza Library, meeting Daniyal, an aristocratic resident, and managing a book club of the town's snobs, it could well be the story of the author Tarana Khan herself. She has been working on these subjects in Rampur for decades, in both fiction and non-fiction.

Rukmini also tells the story of Hijab in second person, as if conversing with her across centuries. More than the romances and cultural details in the novel, an important discussion is about the challenges of acceptance a woman poet or author faces in a male-dominated society and in Urdu literature, whether in the past or now. While Munni Bai 'Hijab' tried to learn the nuances of poetry from Dagh, and even taught other courtesan poets in Calcutta, she was forgotten; hardly any of her verses survived, whereas Dagh remains the star of Urdu poetry. Rukmini, too, had to seek approval and *islah* (refinement) from men like Daniyal to be accepted as a writer, often even being attracted to him physically.

While extensive quotations from hundreds of letters and verses tend to make this novel a historical source about the poet and the courtesan, a casual reader looking for a quick tale of gossip and romance may find some of those quotes a burden and would have been happier with a slightly shorter and crispier novel. Nevertheless, it's a document that provides context to appreciating Dagh's poetry and the lives of courtesans and musicians in colonial India, many of whom were regularly travelling from patron to patron in search of livelihood.

— The reviewer is a Delhi-based filmmaker and writer

Between hope & despair

TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

I CAN'T remember another time when I sat down to write a column on the first day of a new year. So how can one not let in some thoughts regarding hope and despair creep in? I sincerely hope that I will manage to evoke more hope than despair so let me begin with what has really shaken my faith.

Look no further than the shameful behaviour of Hindu mobs over Christmas celebrations in the last week of 2025 (to say nothing of similar behaviour spread through the year). What joy does one get after destroying a fellow Indian's happiness in the simple joys of buying and wearing Santa caps or going to church? Time was when we all liked to attend the Midnight Mass if only to imbibe the peace under a magnificent dome and listen to some Christmas music. The sound of an organ is truly uplifting in a way that no other music can be. This is as true of the *Gurbani* that is continuously sung in gurdwaras as well. Or the sonorous chanting of Buddhist *mantras* that seem to arise from the solar plexus of the earth. The sound of these chants and hymns reach out to men and women of all faiths — so what were those goons wielding *lathis* and swords trying to convey? Did they not realise how much harm they did to their own religion by their disgusting behaviour?

I have another problem related to this. Throughout that evening and for the next few days, all our media could do was play these ugly scenes on a loop and invite guests to provoke a larger debate. What should have been ignored was provided the oxygen that the goons wanted. Believe me, now every time there is another non-Hindu celebration, these worthies will arrive to seek attention. There are so many examples that can be mentioned on such occasions but if our media and social media platforms only sensationalise the lowest form of human behaviour, we will get more and more of it. Equally, why haven't our political leaders condemned these despicable specimens of Hinduism? It makes one wonder at the silence in every party to speak up for decency and mutual respect.

While on despair, let us also acknowledge the alarming state of our environment and the killer pollution levels all over North India. Delhi is now officially labelled as the most polluted city in the world, so join me in lowering the decibel levels of our *rah-rah walas* when they speak of our rising trillions. If our children are in danger of serious health damage, then what do we care for having overtaken Japan's economy? Has anyone seen the level of cleanliness there and the respect with which the Japanese treat their older folk and the world around them?

I will never forget how moving it was to watch Japanese fans at the last World Cup (which they lost), clearing up the litter left behind by the other beer-bloated, pot-bellied football fans. That is what I regard as a true indicator of civic responsibility and God knows when our *paan*-spitting, nose blowing, red-light jumping hordes will reach there. Until then, fourth or third economy, India ranks at the bottom as far as I'm concerned.

Let us now start on what makes me happy. It is seeing little children, shiny faced and neatly dressed in clean uniforms, going to school. No matter what the quality of that education may be, the fact that there is a universal acknowledgement that all children — girls included — must study, is a huge victory in a country where parents, who were themselves uneducated, never considered education a vital parental responsibility. However flawed, the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan and the incentive of a free lunch have played a role in raising this awareness. Leaders such as Jayalalithaa and Nitish Kumar deserve our gratitude for having made the effort to make education — especially for the girl child — a pivotal axis of development. Remember that many of our best athletes, cricketers and boxers (to name just a few stars) come from small towns and villages and have struggled to reach the top. Today we have reached a stage where sport is no longer looked at as a waste of time but the means to a successful career. I can see India doing really well in this century.

What joy does one get after destroying a fellow Indian's happiness in the simple joys of buying and wearing Santa caps or going to church?

I am also hopeful that there will be a reverse flow of Indian talent. More and more young people are turning to start their own ventures or joining a start-up here rather than opting for a life as a second-class citizen abroad. Trump and stray incidents of violence against non-white citizens in the western world have made many bright young people reconsider their decision to bring up a family cut off from the warmth of the Great Indian Family.

These days, many friends and relatives have their NRI children visiting them and it is a joy to see the children soak in the attention and indulgence of the grandparents. If we can somehow build on this mood, we will have achieved a dream I've always nurtured of living within close distance of my grandchildren.

Finally, here's hoping that we pick up more languages than shedding them. My generation grew up listening to and speaking at least three (more if our parents came from different states) and what a difference that has made to our acceptance of differences!

— The writer is a social commentator

Measuring Aravallis & immeasurable damage

AVAY SHUKLA

INDIA ranks 176 out of 180 countries in the Environmental Performance Index. Every piece of data shows that we fully deserve our miserable ranking. Reaching these depths has not been easy — we have been working hard at it in order to award a bunch of crony capitalists unlimited access to the nation's natural wealth. But that is not the only sad part; the real tragedy is that the higher judiciary has looked the other way at this continental scale of vandalism and provided its seal of approval to much of this environmental depredation.

It was not always so. People of my vintage can remember the 1990s and the first decade of this millennium when apex court judges like Justice Kirpal and Justice Ahmadi stood like a wall, shielding the country's natural environment from the excesses of the executive, strictly interpreting and implementing the laws meant to protect them. I dare not even imagine what our environment would have been like if it had not been for the path-breaking judgment in the TN Godavarman case in 1996. And they did this by relying on science and invoking the "precautionary principle", which mandates that if an activity poses a threat of serious or irreversible damage to the environment or human health, pre-emptive protective action should be taken even if there's no full scientific certainty about the risk, shifting the burden of proof to those arguing the activity is safe. They rooted this principle in Article 21, which is a guarantee of a healthy and dignified life.

The mess we are in today is because our higher judiciary has abandoned these principles and finds it more convenient to go along with the government whose core ideology is based on an anti-scientific temper.

This trend of ignoring science first became noticeable with the twisted logic in the Ram Mandir judgment where architectural and historical evidence were jettisoned in favour of faith and religious bias. It has since become routine in cases like the SDP 41 (Shimla Development Plan 2041), which was approved in spite of concerns of experts that it would demolish the city's 17 green belts, permit multi-storey structures in a high-seismic zone, and was rightly struck down by the NGT; the firecrackers case (so-called "green" crackers being allowed even though they emit 70 per cent of the pollutants that the regular ones do); the stray dogs case (in which global practices, experts, voluntary organisations, even the existing law, were ignored); the Char Dham highway project (where 'security' was allowed to trump geological science); the Vanshakti case where the basic, well established principle of "polluter pays" was turned on its head to "pay and pollute" in order to legalise illegalities.

The Aravalli judgment of November 2025 is a continuation of this pernicious trend, though the most shocking, given that it was delivered at a time when the whole NCR was being asphyxiated in the most deadly shroud of pollution.

The adverse effects of this judgment are by now too well known. Suffice it to say that it would fragment the range into thousands of isolated pockets and render the Indo-Gangetic plain, perhaps the most polluted region in the world, completely inhabitable due to depleted water tables, rapid desertification, increased temperatures and dust pollution. It is inexplicable why the SC chose to reinstate the 100-metre height formula which it had rejected in 2010.

It failed to appreciate that the most important ecological services of a mountain system are provided not by the peaks, but by its lower formations — the troughs, ravines, valleys, foothills — which trap the rainfall, store the moisture, enable the growth of green cover which traps dust and regulates temperature.

The most sensible word on this judgment comes from Harish Salve in a TV interview. He says he finds no reasoning given by the court for ignoring the recommendations of the Amicus Curiae, Empowered Committee, GSI and FSI to go by the slope criteria, and instead adopting the 100-metre matrix. The Aravallis are not a collection of hills of varying heights, they are a two-billion-old ecosystem so there was absolutely no need to define them in vertical terms. Every mountain range has contours of varying heights, and each is as important as the other; they cannot be sliced into a thousand fragments based on height, and parts of them opened up for mining.

One cannot but agree with Salve that the court lost its way in being sidetracked into the vertical argument. What was needed, in fact, was to determine (not define) what constitutes the Aravallis in spatial (not vertical) terms as it existed for thousands of years, not in its present form where legal and illegal mining of 10 million tonnes every year has denuded vast parts of it.

Salve is of the view that the court should adopt the Godavarman definition of a "deemed" forest for the entire Aravallis (i.e. even a denuded area, if it was once a forest, shall be deemed to be a forest for the purposes of protection).

The aerial spread of the range should be mapped, classified as an eco-sensitive zone and declared a no-go area for any exploitative purposes, including mining and real estate. CAMPA funds should then be utilised for re-afforesting its mined out/denuded parts.

The court's reasoning, or whatever little of it one can discern, is faulty and unscientific: the apprehension of illegal mining cannot be used as an excuse for expanding legal mining. For, the deleterious effects of both are similar. What is required is not an SMP (Sustainable Mining Plan), but an SCP (Sustainable Conservation Plan).

It is encouraging to note that the court has stayed this order. One hopes it will listen to the experts, heed the science behind the environment, not dismember the range for the convenience of mining, and declare the entire Aravallis an ESZ. Nearly 30 per cent of these precious mountains have already been plundered. It is incumbent upon the court to protect what remains and hand it down to future generations as its singular legacy. This is one time when, in the words of Justice Robert H Jackson, it has to be both infallible and final.

— The writer is a retired IAS officer

Life as a game of Snakes and Ladders

UNIVERSE
GAUR GOPAL DAS

ALONE in my room, I found myself reflecting on how my social media journey had been nothing less than a game of Snakes and Ladders. When I first started posting on social media, it felt like I was rolling the dice without knowing the rules. Some posts barely moved a few steps forward. Others, unexpectedly, caught people's attention and it felt like a ladder was propelling me upwards. One video would suddenly be shared everywhere and I'd think, "This is it, I've made it to 99!" But then… silence. A snake. Viewer engagement would drop, criticism would creep in, and I'd find myself back on square 10, wondering if I should keep playing at all.

Of course, my intention was always to share wisdom and spread the message. Yet, like in the game itself, the snakes and ladders do affect you — they remind you that while the dice may not always be in your control, your purpose can be.

The truth is, both snakes and ladders are part of the game. You can't enjoy the thrill of the ladders without letting the snakes humble you. And the biggest lesson is that neither define you — the dice keeps rolling as long as you keep showing up.

For me, the ladders came when I spoke authentically, when I shared stories straight from my heart. The snakes appeared whenever I tried too hard to please the algorithms, trends or expectations. Each snake taught me humility while each ladder taught me gratitude. And both together taught me perseverance.

The greatest anchor for me was a principle explained by Shri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita — Nishkama Karma Yoga*. It involves working with attachment but disconnecting with detachment.

Nishkama Karma means giving our best without being attached to the result. It's not about being lazy or careless — it's about doing our duty with sincerity and then letting go. If there's no passion, we stop trying. But if we're too attached, we suffer when things don't go our way. The dice won't always roll in our favour, and that's when detachment helps us stay calm, accept what comes with grace and dignity, and try again. And then there is the danger of getting carried away by two extremes — ladders that feed our ego and snakes that fuel our hopelessness. We swing endlessly between pride and despair. Even Arjun, the great warrior of the *Mahabharata*, felt that pull on the battlefield — torn between duty and emotion, clarity and confusion.

Nishkama Karma teaches us equanimity — to stay balanced. Yes, as humans, we will get affected. But the practice helps us bounce back quicker, and with grace. My years of *ashram* training, before I ever touched social media, were invaluable in helping me navigate this game.

And here's the key: *Nishkama Karma* becomes *Yoga* when we tie our work to something higher. When our actions are not just for personal gain but are offered in service — to others, to society or to the Divine — they carry a deeper purpose. Then every effort, whether big or small, becomes sacred. Writing a post, preparing a meal, helping a colleague, raising a child — any of it can become *Yoga* if done in the spirit of contribution. When we work this way, ladders don't inflate our ego because we see them as grace, and snakes don't crush our spirit because we see them as growth. Both become part of a larger journey of service.

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So, if you're chasing a dream — whether it's social media growth, a career milestone or a personal goal — remember this: It's not about reaching the hundredth square in one perfect roll. It's about staying in the game, learning from every climb and every fall, and remembering that every square you land on is shaping you.

Because in the end, life isn't about avoiding snakes. It's about learning to rise again, roll again and keep moving — until your story finds its way to others.

Often, we only see the tip of the iceberg — the visible success, the achievements, the life people have built. What we fail to notice is the vast part beneath the surface, hidden from the eyes — failures, disappointments, struggles, commitment, discipline and resilience — that truly holds everything up.

— Excerpted from 'You Can Have It All', with permission from HarperCollins

The complicated writer-editor relationship

BINDU MENON

I FIND it endlessly fascinating to watch videos on art restoration. Old masterpieces appear frayed at the edges, faded in places, their surfaces marked by cracks, tears and the slow abrasion of time. Restoration is painstaking work. Layers of accumulated grime are removed, yellowed varnish stripped away, torn canvases mended, cracks filled and areas of loss delicately retouched. The before-and-after images bear quiet witness to this change.

Yet restoration is never simply repair. It demands restraint, for excessive intervention can erase the very history a work carries. The restorer must decide what to clean, what to leave untouched and what may be retouched — always in fidelity to the artist's vision. In this, restoration resembles editing.

Editors — whether in journalism, publishing, or film — are the unsung heroes of cultural production. Their labour is largely invisible, yet their judgment shapes what the world finally sees, reads or remembers. When editing works, it leaves no fingerprints. The work appears whole and coherent. That invisibility is why editors are rarely celebrated, even as their imprint is everywhere.

Legendary Canadian editor Ellen Seligman, who worked on the manuscripts of writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Rohinton Mistry and Elizabeth Hay, once observed that a good editor must first be a good listener. "You have to listen to what the book is telling you," she said, "and not impose your own ideas on it." What mattered most to her was dialogue — being able to say something about a manuscript that struck a chord with the author, signalling that both were essentially speaking the same language.

Atwood memorably described Seligman as a "hands-on shepherd to her flock of often straying lambs". Ondaatje recalled that while working on *'The Skin of a Lion'*, he frequently argued with her. But he acknowledged that he "probably learned more about writing and form and subtlety" from that collaboration than ever before — and that there was "nothing in that book that I am not proud of".

Maxwell Perkins, one of America's finest literary editors, offers another compelling example. He helped bring to life the work of Ernest Hemingway, F Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe, among others. The story goes that Fitzgerald's first draft was rejected by all the senior editors at the publishing house Scribner's. However, Perkins — then a junior editor — argued passionately in its favour. The publisher, Charles Scribner, opted to trust the young editor's instinct. Guided by Perkins, Fitzgerald's debut novel, *'This Side of Paradise'*, became a runaway success. Later, when Fitzgerald proposed the title *'Trimalchio in the West Egg'* for his third novel, his mentor very tactfully suggested a different one — thus giving the world *'The Great Gatsby'*.

Editors are the unsung heroes of cultural production, but what endures is the work's capacity to speak

Perkins was equally instrumental in shaping Wolfe's vast, unruly manuscripts into publishable form. *'Look Homeward, Angel'* emerged from that painstaking collaboration. Wolfe, deeply grateful, dedicated his next novel to Perkins, and their intense relationship later inspired the film *'Genius'*.

TS Eliot, too, owed an immense debt to his editor and mentor Ezra Pound, who famously cut nearly half of the original manuscript of *'The Waste Land'*, sharpening its compression and intensity. Eliot acknowledged this intervention by dedicating the poem to Pound as *il miglior fabbro* — "the better craftsman". Pound himself was less modest, claiming full collaborator status in a celebratory poem: *"If you must needs enquire / Know diligent Reader / That on each Occasion / Ezra performed the Caesarean Operation."*

Not all editorial relationships, however, survive such interventions unscathed. Gordon Lish's role in shaping Raymond Carver's sparse prose remains one of the most contested examples in literary history. Lish cut Carver's stories drastically, helping define a form that would come to dominate late 20th-century American short fiction. Yet Carver later expressed regret over the extent of these changes, feeling that a minimalistic style had been imposed upon him. Lish, characteristically unapologetic, countered: "Had I not revised Carver, would he be paid the attention given him? Baloney!"

These examples underline the complicated, often fraught, relationship between writers and editors. Editing, like restoration, is an act of power as much as care. The central ethical question remains unresolved: how far can an editor go in enabling a work without appropriating it? Does the editor owe allegiance to the writer's intention, or to literature itself? Where does guidance end and overreach begin?

As with restoration, perhaps the answer lies in restraint. The finest editors know that their task is to strengthen what is weak, to illuminate what is obscure and to step back before intervention becomes excision. What endures, finally, is not the editor's hand, but the work's capacity to speak — clearly, honestly and across time.

— The writer is based in Bengaluru

The precarious lives of women performers

Assaults in Haryana expose grim reality behind festive stages, where livelihood, violence and silence collide, and resistance comes at a devastating cost

SUMEDHA SHARMA

Dance performances are an accepted and integral part of weddings, election rallies and local celebrations in parts of Haryana. A majority of these women are primary earners for their families.

VIDEOS of assaults on women performers at wedding celebrations in Haryana's Mewat region have briefly pierced public consciousness. But behind the outrage lies a far deeper reality — of livelihoods built on applause, bodies exposed to violence, and women punished for resisting what society quietly normalises.

It was meant to be just another November work night for Payal Chowdhary. Under flashing multicoloured lights and the thump of loud music, she danced before an all-male crowd at a pre-wedding function in Nuh. The payment was standard. So was the behaviour: whistles, leering eyes, crude gestures. Payal was prepared for it, hoping only to finish the performance and return home before dawn. What followed though was anything but routine.

Mid-performance, a man from the crowd tried to grope her. When Payal instinctively pushed his hand away, the mood shifted violently. She was slapped repeatedly, pinned to the ground, dragged and beaten as others joined in. Two other dancers and a man who tried to intervene were also beaten.

Too shaken to react, she was eventually pulled out of the venue by her team. The next morning, Payal woke up bruised, her eye swollen, her body aching, only to discover that a video of her assault had gone viral.

Within weeks, another incident surfaced. This time it was Asmeena, popularly known as the "Kareena of Mewat", trapped amid a frenzied crowd during a wedding performance. As hundreds of men surged towards the stage, she managed to escape by climbing over a wall and fleeing in a waiting vehicle.

Together, the clips triggered nationwide outrage. For women performers in Mewat, however, they merely confirmed a long-standing, brutal pattern: alleged molestation, public violence, and swift punishment for those who resist.

Many of them spoke up in Payal's support, praising her decision to stand up for herself and denounced the harassment that they face during performances.

Mewat — spread across parts of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh — is among the country's most socio-economically backward regions. Here, dance performances are an accepted and integral part of weddings, election rallies and local celebrations. These events are almost exclusively male spaces; women from host families are expected to stay indoors or watch discreetly from rooftops.

Residents say inviting Mewati dancers to wedding celebrations is common practice. Women perform to popular Bollywood and regional songs, cheered and showered with currency notes.

"For them, I am no less than Alia Bhatt tonight," says Mahi, a 23-year-old dancer, adjusting her bright orange *lehenga* moments before stepping on stage.

Most dancers come from poor, uneducated backgrounds.

With growing exposure to cinema and social media, expectations of alluring acts seem to have intensified. For those in the crowd, the line between performance and entitlement has all but vanished.

"It has been the toughest few months of my life," says Payal. "Yes, they pay us, but we are not prostitutes. They don't buy us. Before every show, we make it clear — no touching. Still, every man tries. We ignore a hand on the hip or an elbow brushing the chest, but this time he tried to grope me and shove money into my blouse. I flicked his hand away, and suddenly I was being beaten," she adds.

What followed was even more terrifying. "The police saw the video. Instead of asking for help, I was scared I'd be targeted if I complained. I began receiving rape and death threats. My shows were cancelled. I was labelled 'uncooperative'. I have children to feed. I had no option but to move on," Payal says.

Asmeena's ordeal in Palla village followed a similar script. The event, which also featured singer Salman Ali, drew an unusually large crowd. Witnesses say a young man tried to misbehave with her near the stage. Chaos erupted. As she was rushed out, she scaled a wall and escaped. Meanwhile, the accused was assaulted by others in the crowd — another scene that quickly went viral.

"After almost 15 years in this profession, I know the risks," says Muskan, another dancer, as she applies a cheap concealer over scratches on her back from the previous night's performance. "Earlier, village elders would control the crowd. Now social media-crazed mobs lose control in minutes. Going to the police is not an option. We are blacklisted, our numbers are circulated, and threats follow. Then how do we run our homes?" she asks.

Above: Payal Chowdhary was severely beaten when she pushed away the hand of a man trying to grope her. Below: During a wedding performance, Asmeena (R) escaped by scaling a wall when a frenzied crowd surged towards the stage. A grandmother now, her performances over the years have funded her lawyer son's education.

A majority of the women performers are primary earners for their families. Their husbands act as their managers, who get bookings, manage payments and also ensure their safety. Most of the women opted for this profession to supplement the family income.

Asmeena, who is now a grandmother, has hopefully changed the fate for her next generations. Thanks to her performances, her son has become a lawyer. He lives with his wife and children in Alwar, Rajasthan — where he doesn't have to deal with the consequences of his mother's 'other' side.

Speaking to *The Tribune*, the husband of one of the women performers, not willing to be named, says, "We come from poor, uneducated backgrounds. I was a mechanic when she started dancing at public functions to pay for the education of our son, who studies in a private institution in Rajasthan. Since then, we have never looked back. It was her income that paid for my parents' treatment, our son's school and hostel fees and even for buying an LED TV."

Their son, he says, never talks to anyone about his mother, and she also stays away from his school. "We don't post family pictures," adds the man from Uttar Pradesh.

Dance troupes earn anywhere between ₹5,000 and ₹50,000 per event, depending on the crowd and duration. Experienced performers may receive up to 30 per cent of the earnings, including tips thrown on stage. Younger or less "desirable" dancers often get as little as 5 per cent.

The violence reflects a deeper discomfort with women asserting agency in public spaces — especially in regions where entertainment, morality and gender norms collide.

This is not unique to Mewat.

Across Bihar, particularly in districts such as Champaran, Saran, Ara and Buxar, similar wedding dance performances — locally known as orchestra shows — are common. Social workers say many women performing at these events are forced into the profession and routinely subjected to non-consensual touching and sexual harassment. Human trafficking remains a persistent concern.

Local journalists say every wedding season brings reports of gunfire, kidnapping and coercion linked to orchestra performances, many of which never reach public attention. Orchestra operators deny involvement in trafficking but acknowledge the dangers.

Experts say change is impossible without coordination between performers, organisers and law enforcement.

In Haryana, public harassment of women performers has long been normalised. It drew wider attention when popular Haryanvi singer Pranjal Dahiya stopped a live concert recently to reprimand the men crowding her stage. Her firm warning — "*Tauji*, I am your daughter's age" — was widely applauded online.

But for Mewati dancers, with little social capital or institutional backing, defiance comes at a steep price. For them, the question is no longer about a single performance or a single night. It is about whether the system will recognise them as workers deserving dignity and protection, or continue to look away as celebration turns into violence, and resistance into retribution.

Why it's essential to fix infra before allowing more airlines

Past experience has shown that the regulator is incapable of strictly enforcing safety norms for even the existing operators

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

A recent report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee says that in the trade-off between grounding an aircraft for maintenance and scheduling it for journeys, airlines prioritise profiteering over safety concerns. MANAS RANJAN BHUI

Filling up vacancies in critical areas affecting safety, strengthening enforcement mechanisms, enhancing regulatory autonomy and competence should be the priority in 2026

CIVIL aviation is once again in the news. I am not referring to the flight disruptions caused by heavy fog in the northern parts of the country, but to news reports that three new air operators are likely to hit the Indian skies soon. At first glance, it seems like a very positive development, particularly in the aftermath of the IndiGo meltdown, when everyone realised the folly of allowing one airline to dominate the skies.

However, in the interest of consumer safety, I would very strongly argue in favour of the Ministry of Civil Aviation first improving the safety infrastructure before permitting more airlines to enter the skies. From past experiences in general and the IndiGo fiasco in particular, it is very clear that the regulator — Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) — does not have the capability to strictly enforce safety regulations in respect of even the existing operators. So, burdening the regulator with more players and more compliance monitoring would only imperil passenger safety.

Take, for example, the media reports on the very first day of 2026 about the show-cause notice issued by the DGCA to Air India for operating a Boeing Dreamliner despite persistent technical snags. This violation (and many others) by the airline is not only a reflection of its contempt for laws and standards meant for passenger safety, but also the regulator's inability to rein in recalcitrant airlines. In fact, a recent report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee (August 2025) flagged many such vulnerabilities in India's aviation safety.

The observations of the committee on the attitude of airlines to aircraft maintenance is highly worrisome. "What has come to light is that in the trade-off between grounding an aircraft for maintenance and scheduling it for passenger journeys, airlines prioritise profiteering over safety concerns. Even when an obvious maintenance flaw comes to light, the flight is not immediately grounded, rather the aircraft continues to be in operation for some more passenger flights before it is grounded for maintenance purposes," it notes.

When the regulator notifies airlines about the deficiencies in safety compliance, one expects the service providers to fix the flaws with alacrity. However, that is not always the case, despite the seriousness of some of the safety lapses. In this context, the Parliamentary Committee refers to the DGCA's annual surveillance programme. Describing it as a cornerstone of the DGCA's safety oversight function, designed to proactively identify and rectify non-compliance by airlines, the committee points out that the regulator has an impressive record of unearthing deficiencies. However, in the absence of strict post-surveillance regulatory oversight, many of the flaws linger on, says the report.

In 2024, for example, the DGCA conducted 3,995 surveillance exercises, identifying 12,683 deficiencies, comprising 81 serious level-1 and 12,602 level-2 lapses. However, 961 level-2 deficiencies remained pending at the close of 2024.

In 2025, up to April, surveillance activities detected 4,692 deficiencies, but only 945 were rectified, leaving a staggering 3,747 deficiencies pending. This included 37 level-1 deficiencies, representing serious safety lapses requiring immediate attention. In fact, the surveillance creates a false sense of security where the 'activity' of conducting thousands of audits is mistaken for the 'outcome' of enhanced safety, the report says.

The IndiGo crisis brought into the limelight a critical safety factor that most air passengers were unaware of: the importance of ensuring adequate rest for pilots, to mitigate pilot fatigue and stress. In January 2024, a Batik Air flight in Indonesia was found to be flying on an incorrect path following both the pilot and the co-pilot falling asleep. In 2022, an Ethiopian airline missed the Addis Ababa landing for similar reasons. In fact, sleep inertia and the consequent impaired judgement is said to have contributed to the tragic air accident in Mangaluru in 2010, resulting in 158 deaths.

The parliamentary report focuses not only on the safety significance of Flight Duty Time Limitations for pilots, but also for air traffic controllers (ATC). And it expresses distress over the acute shortage of ATCs at a time when their workload has increased tremendously on account of the sheer volume of traffic and the growing complexity of airspace management.

The report is also critical of how the regulators (the Airports Authority of India and the DGCA) themselves are violating the prescribed Watch Duty Time Limitation norms for air traffic controllers at numerous airports through exemptions!

All in all, 2025 will go down in history as an extremely bad year for air passenger safety as well as passenger rights in India. Besides the Air India air crash at Ahmedabad which tragically snuffed out the lives of 260 persons, the IndiGo meltdown led to severe violations of passenger rights. So, before authorising more airlines to operate, the civil aviation ministry should first fix the infrastructural and regulatory lacunae that jeopardise passenger safety. This should include filling up vacancies in critical areas affecting safety, strengthening the enforcement mechanisms, enhancing regulatory autonomy and competence. In fact, that should be the priority in 2026.

— The writer is a consumer affairs expert

the hindu businessline.
SATURDAY - JANUARY 3, 2026

Sunny prospects

Green power markets to benefit from further reforms

The year 2026 could turn out to a bright one for the renewable energy sector. The foundations were laid last year. More than 50 GW of renewable capacity was added — a record — with solar accounting for over four-fifths of this addition. Installed solar and wind capacities crossed the milestones of 125 GW and 50 GW respectively. This strong performance enabled India to cross two significant thresholds: total renewable energy capacity surged past 200 GW, and non-fossil fuel-based electricity generation capacity rose to more than half of total installed capacity — a psychological leadership position for renewables.

Alongside, the solar module manufacturing industry built up a cumulative capacity of 100 GW. Reinforcing the momentum achieved in 2025 is the fact that 69 GW of solar and 30 GW of wind capacity are already under construction, with much more capacity under various stages of tendering. It is, therefore, time for India to consolidate. The environment is favourable. Notably, the achievements of 2025 came despite several headwinds: a shortage of domestically manufactured solar cells mandated for domestic content requirement projects; grid-related issues leading to solar curtailment (at times as high as 40 per cent on certain days); and the loss of the US export market due to the Trump effect (97 per cent of India's solar module exports go to the US). While the trajectory of the US market remains uncertain, the other two constraints are likely to ease, driven by increased availability of domestic cells and accelerated deployment of battery energy storage systems.

On the policy and regulatory front, 2025 saw important reforms. General Network Access was operationalised, and the day was split into solar and non-solar hours, unlocking transmission infrastructure for use during otherwise idle periods. While 2026 inherits a rich bounty, complacency would be misplaced. Achieving the next phase of growth will require careful crafting of policy and regulatory frameworks. Several such measures were initiated in 2025, and much now depends on how effectively they are carried through. An overhaul of the Electricity Act, for instance, is in the offing. The draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, seeks to truly open up the sector by allowing multiple distribution companies to operate in the same area. This reform is critical, not least because the Supreme Court has directed discoms to liquidate their regulatory assets (the cost-revenue gap to be recovered later) within four years — a move that will inevitably result in higher tariffs. It would be a travesty of justice for a monopolist to pass on rising costs to consumers without the disciplining force of competition.

Another eagerly awaited reform is the government's initiative to roll out the India Energy Stack, often described as 'Aadhaar for electricity'. The IES could enable innovations such as virtual power plants and peer-to-peer electricity trading, significantly expanding the market for renewable energy.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH

ROUHIN DEB
ANANYA DUBEY

What 100% FDI means for Indian insurance

MORE COVER. The opening up of the insurance sector will lead to much needed capital infusion, especially in the non-life and health segments

The recently passed Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill 2025 now completely opens up the insurance sector by allowing 100 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) in the insurance landscape of India. This is a significant step as according to the 66th Report of Standing Committee on Finance (2023-24), insurers in India require constant long-term capital commitment.

Many private insurers in India, especially in non-life and health segments, face capital constraints due to limited capacity of Indian promoters to inject repeated capital, high cost of domestic capital and long periods of initial losses before breakeven. This hampers the ability of insurers to expand operations, invest in technology and enter underserved or high-risk segments leading to very low insurance penetration in the country.

Initial reservations were attributed to protect its nascent domestic industry and safeguard national savings. Prior to liberalization, this also helped ensure control over critical financial resources and prevent foreign domination.

However, the insurance sector has come a long way since then. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has experienced a significant and progressive deregulation, with the investment cap steadily increasing over time and now standing at a proposal of 100 per cent.

PATH TO REFORM

It started with opening up of the sector back in August 2000 trying to bring in more players from the private sector in the industry and ending the monopoly of the state-owned Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) and General Insurance Corporation (GIC). It opened the market in August 2000 allowing foreign companies an ownership of up to 26 per cent. Through an amendment in 2015 to the Insurance Act 1938, ownership was raised to 49 per cent. Further in 2021, through another amendment, the cap was further raised to 74 per cent.

Now, Further opening up of the insurance sector definitely has potential to improve the performance of the Indian insurance landscape. First, capital scarcity is a structural constraint, impeding the growth of insurers. Insurers must maintain high solvency margins, invest in long-term assets, and absorb underwriting risks over decades in order to expand, for which they require capital.

Domestic promoters often lack the incentive to invest in a long-gestation business such as insurance. FDI has the potential to augment long-term capital. Second, foreign insurers bring more than just capital to the table. They bring new and innovative risk pricing and underwriting models and advanced actuarial science. This leads to product innovation and diversification of options for Indian consumers.

Third, the returns for insurers planning to venture to the underserved populations require large upfront investments with uncertain short-term returns. Foreign investors, with diversified global portfolios, are better positioned to absorb these initial losses and finance long-term market creation, something domestic investors may be reluctant to do.

Lastly, public sector dominance has ensured stability in this sector but it has also reduced competitive pressure, slowed innovation and crowded out private investment. Higher FDI is implicitly seen as a way to level the playing field, strengthen private players, and deepen competition without dismantling public sector insurers.

Foreign investment will pump in long-term capital that is needed for the long gestation insurance sector. It can also help penetrate the underserved segments of the society

Increased foreign direct investment in insurance has led to improved market penetration, innovative underwriting and risk pricing models, and diverse products in several countries. China has moved toward 100 per cent foreign ownership in insurance businesses, allowing companies like Chubb and Manulife to acquire full ownership of local insurance firms.

Similarly countries like Canada, Australia and Brazil have greatly relaxed foreign ownership restrictions. Following the move toward 100 per cent FDI, global insurer Generali Group announced plans to inject additional capital into its Indian joint venture to expand operations. This is a direct example of how full ownership can unlock new investment commitments that were limited under previous caps.

THE CHALLENGES

However, opening up the insurance sector also comes with certain challenges that need to be addressed. First, the supposed expertise of foreign insurers is doubtful, evidenced by incidents like the global financial crisis. A 2014 report by the Korea Finance Consumer Federation showed that foreign life insurance companies in South Korea were responsible for a disproportionately high share of financial fraud.

Allowing FDI in India's insurance sector therefore risks exposing our financial markets to the perilous activities of foreign firms, especially as their regulation remains debated in advanced nations.

Second, the foreign firms would need to adapt to local distribution models such as India's bancassurance model, which might pose a challenge. Further, they would have to diversify products to cater to the low-income segment as well.

Third, a significant portion of profits flow out of the host country due to FDI, reducing long-term local economic benefits. Also, complete ownership in firms can reduce local decision making powers. Lastly, aggressive policies of foreign insurers might lead to market volatility.

The move by the government to allow 100 per cent FDI in this sector is a confident step, showing the government's belief in the resilience of India's insurance ecosystem. The reforms need to be undertaken with an iron hand to ensure proper regulatory oversight, for which the Bill empowers IRDAI to disgorge wrongful gains from insurers and intermediaries by raising the penalty from ₹1 crore to ₹10 crore.

If implemented properly, this move has the potential to increase capital investment, enhance the existing product segment and expand market coverage.

Deb is Chief Economist, Chief Minister's Secretariat, Government of Assam; Dubey is Mukherjee Fellow, Policy Politic & Governance Foundation

India's overlooked crisis: unsafe drinking water

Indore tragedy informs us that better utility mapping and independent water regulation are vital for providing safe water

Anurodh Lalit Jain

India has learnt to quantify its environmental crises. Air pollution is tracked meticulously through the Air Quality Index; heatwaves and floods dominate daily public discourse. Yet, when drinking water turns deadly, the response remains dangerously delayed, localised, and short-lived.

The recent tragedy in Bhagirathpura, Indore, where contaminated water led to multiple deaths and widespread illness, is not an aberration. It is a symptom of a deeper governance failure. What occurred in Indore mirrors incidents across the political and geographical map.

In Gujarat's Mahisagar district, a recent jaundice outbreak was linked to contamination of borewell and municipal sources. In Tiruvallur, Tamil Nadu, residents were hospitalised after consuming polluted supply water. These episodes, echoing the devastation of the 2014 hepatitis outbreak in Sambhalpur, Odisha, underline a stark reality: unsafe drinking water is not a localised lapse, but a recurring national emergency.

The scale of this crisis is staggering. Between 2005 and 2022, India reported over 20.98 crore cases of major water-borne diseases — including Acute Diarrhoeal Disease, Typhoid, Viral Hepatitis, and Cholera—leading to more than 50,000 deaths. However, these figures represent only the tip of the iceberg.

According to NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index, nearly 200,000 people die every year in India due to inadequate access to safe water. Despite these harrowing numbers, water quality rarely generates the same political urgency as other environmental markers. India continues to rank near the bottom of the global Water Quality Index — placing 120th out of 122 countries — with an estimated 70 per cent of its water sources contaminated.

THE ECONOMIC COST

While the human cost is visible in hospital wards, the economic cost remains poorly acknowledged. Illness caused by contaminated supply triggers a cycle of lost workdays, rising medical expenditure, and reduced labour productivity affecting 37.7 million people and resulting into a loss of approximately 73 million working days annually, per Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation.

The root cause of these outbreaks is rarely the water source itself, but the journey it takes to the tap. In Bhagirathpura, as in many Indian cities, reports point to sewage mixing with drinking water lines — a familiar urban failure reflecting the siloed execution of infrastructure. Municipal departments often operate in isolation. Road construction agencies routinely excavate without coordinating with water and sewerage boards. In the absence of accurate, shared maps of underground utilities, heavy machinery cracks drinking water pipes and ruptures adjacent sewer lines.

SAFE WATER. Need for accountability PTI

During pressure drops, sewage is drawn into water mains, contaminating the supply long before the problem becomes visible.

This failure of coordination is compounded by the way urban infrastructure programmes are executed. The second phase of the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT 2.0) aims to make cities "water secure," yet its implementation remains skewed toward asset creation. New pipelines are laid without adequately fixing the governance of ageing, leaking networks beneath them. India has built much of the hardware of urbanisation without embedding the "software" of safety protocols, continuous monitoring, and institutional accountability.

Municipal bodies function as the provider, the tester, and the judge of their own performance. This means the potential polluter and the regulator are often the same entity. Without an independent regulator empowered to mandate standards and penalise failures, testing data is rarely made public, and contamination is acknowledged only after an outbreak produces casualties. Governance thus remains reactive — patching pipes after a tragedy rather than preventing the breach.

Addressing this crisis demands a move from emergency fixes to preventive governance. This requires better utility mapping, independent water regulation to separate providers from auditors, and a shift in AMRUT 2.0 from "coverage targets" to "water safety at the tap". India has learnt to measure the air it breathes. It must now show the same seriousness in safeguarding the water it drinks — not as a welfare afterthought, but as a Constitutional obligation and a foundational economic necessity.

The writer is Vice-Chairman, All India Congress Committee (Minority Department)

LETTERS TO EDITOR

Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Protect gig workers

Apropos, 'Platforms need to deliver on workers' needs,' (January 2). The doorstep-delivery majors strong-armed protesting workers by blocking accounts on their platforms, weakening the nationwide strike by gig workers on December 31. Carrots and sticks ensured there was no major disruption, yet the long-term demands of platform workers remained unaddressed. While online shopping is a necessity for every household, those who ensure delivery are treated as casual labour without regular incomes, employee welfare, or social security. Paradoxically, their earnings are shrinking despite surging delivery volumes. Ten-minute delivery targets push riders to risk life and violate rules, as late arrivals attract penalties. It is time governments cracked the whip. Before another protest snaps fragile lifelines, protection is essential.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Keep other trains clean

This refers to 'First VB Sleeper to link Guwahati and Howrah' (January 1). It is good to note that the indigenously manufactured India's first VB Sleeper Train, equipped with world-class amenities is scheduled to run shortly between Howrah and Guwahati. It will be a great milestone in the annals of Railways. Per Railway Minister, more such VB Sleeper trains are expected to roll out between key cities. Railways must also pay attention to cleanliness in other superfast trains, where unclean toilets are an issue. I am a regular traveller in the Sleeper class between Chennai and Pune and back. I have raised many grievances in CPGRAMS portal on the poor hygienic conditions of sleeper coaches on every trip. This is only getting toggled among Zones across the Railways and Departments for the last six months, with no solutions in sight. It is unfortunate that the Railways seldom alleviate the sufferings of the passengers travelling in long distance trains.

RV Baskaran
Pune

UPI, a boon

This refers to the news report 'UPI volumes rise to a record 22 b in Dec, touch ₹28 lakh crore' (January 2). United Payments Interface (UPI) platform is indeed a boon to people because they need not carry cash. A smartphone and bank balance will do to carry out any transaction. The evolution of money (from barter system to UPI) is really fascinating. That said, users of the platform should use it cautiously.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

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{ THE BIG PICTURE }

In the driving seat to beat pollution, build industry

India must lead the global transport transition by adopting the electrification of transport at scale. It must build a world-leading EV ecosystem grounded in frugal engineering, large-scale manufacturing, and innovation suited to emerging economies

India cannot afford to be a spectator. If we do not aggressively scale electrification across all vehicle segments, we risk losing not only domestic markets but also the opportunity to become a global export hub. AP

Ashok Jhunjhunwala

Delhi's air pollution crisis is reminding us that the shift towards full electric mobility at scale for India is not just desirable, but an immediate imperative. The global auto industry is already undergoing this most consequential transformation of a century. This transition is no longer only about climate action; it has become a decisive marker of industrial competitiveness, technological leadership, and national economic resilience. For India, it is therefore a strategic necessity today.

Over the past decade, India has made early strides in EV manufacturing — battery innovation, and the development of affordable electric two- and three-wheelers. But the pace of global change has accelerated dramatically. China has used electric mobility as a springboard for industrial dominance, controlling major parts of the global EV supply chain. The US and Europe, realising the depth of this shift, have responded with unprecedented industrial policies such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the EU Green Deal. These policies are reshaping global trade flows, investment decisions, and manufacturing footprints.

India cannot afford to be a spectator in this race. If we do not aggressively scale electrification across all vehicle segments, we risk losing not only domestic markets but also the opportunity to become a global export hub. Conversely, if we act decisively today, India can build a world-leading EV ecosystem grounded in frugal engineering, large-scale manufacturing, and innovation suited to emerging economies.

Three priority actions are now essential.

Mandate the electrification of all two- and three-wheelers by 2030: India's transport system is unique: Two- and three-wheelers account for nearly 80% of all vehicles on our roads. They are also the easiest and most cost-effective to electrify. The technology is proven, costs have fallen sharply, and local industry is mature. An electric two-wheeler today can be nearly 30% cheaper to own and operate than its petrol counterpart, especially in urban and peri-urban areas.

A clear regulatory mandate for 100% electric two- and three-wheeler sales by 2030 will send an unambiguous signal to industry. It will give manufacturers the certainty they need to scale up investment in domestic battery production, component manufacturing, and R&D. It will also reduce India's oil import bill, improve urban air quality, and create thousands of green jobs.

Several countries from Indonesia to Thailand and from Taiwan to the EU, have already imposed such mandates or set clear phase-out timelines. India must not lag behind. Our leadership in this segment can form the cornerstone of our global EV export strategy.

Strengthen CAFE norms to drive the electrification of cars: We need to similarly accelerate transition towards full electric passenger cars. Towards this, we need to ensure that our Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) norms are in pace with global advancements. While the EU has implemented a CAFE target of 93.5 g/km in 2025, India is still at 113 g/km. This allows manufacturers to meet fuel-efficiency targets through incremental improvements in internal combustion engines rather than by accelerating the shift toward electric cars.

The dilly-dallying with CAFE will not help. Instead, India must strengthen CAFE regulations beyond what Europe has done; it should also tighten compliance timelines and not allow loopholes such as volume or weight-based derogation. The objective should be simple: Make electrification the most straightforward and economically viable pathway for automakers. For instance, the stringent 2020 European light-duty vehicle CAFE standards drove the manufacturers towards electric vehicles, with EV share in the market increasing from 3% to 11% in a single year.

Stronger CAFE norms will achieve three goals.

First, they will drive innovation, compelling companies to invest in next-generation EV platforms instead of relying on outdated ICE technologies. Second, they will align India with global regulatory standards, enabling our manufacturers to compete in export markets that now demand cleaner vehicles. Third, they will accelerate the availability of affordable electric cars for Indian consumers. The question India must ask is not whether we can afford stronger CAFE norms, but whether we can afford to continue subsidising inefficiency. A well-designed regulatory push will do far more to advance EV adoption than short-term financial incentives.

Enshrine a national "Right to Charge" to accelerate adoption: A major barrier to EV adoption, especially in urban India, is not price or performance, but access to reliable charging at home and at work. More than 60% of urban Indians live in multi-storey apartments or shared housing, where installing chargers often requires tedious approvals from resident welfare associations (RWAs), builders, or facility managers. Without guaranteed access to charging, many potential buyers postpone or abandon the decision to shift to electric.

India urgently needs a national right to charge, a legal framework that guarantees EV buyers the ability to install charging points in their parking spaces, subject only to basic electrical and safety norms.

Similar frameworks already exist in the EU, UK, several US states, and parts of China. They have significantly accelerated EV adoption by eliminating uncertainty for consumers.

A well-designed right to charge law for India should include:

Mandatory access: Any resident with a legal parking spot should be empowered to install a charger without requiring NOC-style approval from RWAs or building associations.

Clear timelines for utilities and DISCOMs: Power utilities must provide sanctioned load augmentation and meter connections within defined time periods.

Builder obligations: New buildings must be constructed with EV-ready wiring, adequate electrical capacity, and spaces designated for slow and fast charging.

Collective solutions: For apartments without individual parking, RWAs should be required to provide sufficient community charging points, supported by government and municipal incentives.

Such a framework will transform EV ownership from a privilege of a few to a mainstream, affordable choice for millions. It will also stimulate demand for chargers, wiring, power electronics, and grid upgrades, contributing directly to India's industrial growth and innovation engine.

Electrifying transport is not merely an environmental responsibility. It is the gateway to becoming a global manufacturing powerhouse. It will reduce India's chronic dependence on imported fossil fuels, improve air quality for millions, and help cities meet public health goals. It will stimulate investment in advanced technologies — from batteries and power electronics to grid modernisation and renewable energy.

Most importantly, it will ensure that India remains competitive as the world moves away from internal combustion engines.

The coming decade will define the winners and laggards of the global automotive industry. India must choose to lead. A decisive policy push for electrification across all vehicle segments, backed by clear mandates, strong standards, and long-term industrial vision, is essential. The world is shifting gear. India must accelerate.

Ashok Jhunjhunwala is chairman, Immersive Technology and Entrepreneurship Labs and Institute Professor, IIT Madras, and chairperson, CAQM's Expert Committee for Abatement of Air Pollution caused by Vehicular Emissions in Delhi-NCR. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar

Spin in speech lights up the conversation

When I was a young teenager in the late 1960s, the 21st century felt like science fiction. If George Orwell's *1984* was still far into the indefinite future, an altogether new century was unimaginable. No one I knew had even thought about it. Probably not even in their dreams. And now here we are in 2026. Not so long ago, that would have been unbelievable.

For a start, I can't help but feel that there is something wondrous about being in 2026. It's like a journey into a future I once thought was far far away. If, in the 1970s and 80s, a time machine could have transported me into the second quarter of the next century, I wouldn't have known what to expect. Yet, it feels surprisingly similar. Life has changed — how could it not? — but it feels the same. I'm still me and I haven't altered. Older, greyer, crankier no doubt, but still the same person and personality. Is that what they call overcoming the challenge of time? The years roll by, but you stay in control of your essential self.

So, four days into the new year, what can we expect of the next 361? To say we don't know is to state the obvious. If we did, it would erase the surprise of life. But there are patterns and habits that can light our way into the future. Of course, things will be different and a lot will change, but much will also stay the same.

I find the year always starts slowly. January and February take their time to roll by. The winter chill makes the days seem longer. Spring lifts spirits and the air begins to feel cheerful. But it's with summer that time starts to gallop. May to September flash past. October is spent reminiscing about the holidays that have just ended. November looks forward to Christmas and December is when the festive spirit takes over.

Is it the predictability of this pattern that makes us creatures of habit? We develop routines that, unconsciously perhaps, but still inevitably, repeat themselves. We may develop, we certainly grow older, but we still do the same things we've done many times before. I guess this is why we look forward to some events, dread others, and dismiss many as boring. The past has taught us what to expect. 2026 will be no different.

I always start the year with a vow. It's something I've done since I was 18. The resolutions have taken many forms. I've promised to exercise daily, give up smoking, stop swearing, or just be soft-spoken and curb my impetuous temper. For the first few weeks, I'm diligent and resolute in sticking to the promise. But come March, my will starts to flag, and by April, I've given up. I doubt it will be different this year.

For 2026, I've set myself a unique if interesting challenge. It's certainly eccentric and idiosyncratic. And it could be the most difficult vow of all to fulfil. I'm going to stop telling little fibs!

Let me add I'm not an incorrigible liar. I don't tell whoppers. But I do gild the lily, embellish, exaggerate, and make false excuses. It is not planned or deliberate. It tends to happen unthinkingly. Even, at times, out of habit. But isn't that what makes conversations interesting?

So, can I become precise and measured, balanced, and accurate without sliding into dull and boring? After all, if you think about it, it is the spin in our speech that attracts attention. Can I curb that and still be worth listening to?

I FIND THE YEAR ALWAYS STARTS SLOWLY. JANUARY AND FEBRUARY TAKE THEIR TIME TO ROLL BY. THE WINTER CHILL MAKES THE DAYS SEEM LONGER. SPRING LIFTS SPIRITS AND THE AIR BEGINS TO FEEL CHEERFUL. BUT IT'S WITH SUMMER THAT TIME STARTS TO GALLOP

I don't know, is the honest answer. Indeed, you'll know before I do. If my columns start to pall, you'll know I've succeeded. But if you keep reading, you can safely assume this is another new year promise I've reneged upon.

So, should I ask you to wish me luck? Or would you prefer I fail? I guess that will determine what you think of these sentiments.

Happy New Year.

Karan Thapar is the author of Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story. The views expressed are personal

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare

Sexual violence and the unevenness of justice

One of the challenges I face as a gender writer is to find stories of hope, aspiration and optimism. You can see it very often shining through in sports, in education, even in jobs and skilling. But sexual crime — as we enter 2026, there is no sign of it abating — is another story.

The year begins with a collective sigh of relief that convicted rapist and former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar will continue to serve out his life sentence for raping a minor girl in 2017. But the fact that he could come this close to walking free tells you something about justice for women — how high the price, how ruinous the cost, how low its priority, and how dogged its pursuit by women themselves. Sengar was convicted for kidnapping and raping a then 17-year-old girl when she had approached him for a job in June 2017. It took a year and an attempted self-immolation by the girl before Uttar Pradesh police would even file her complaint.

Her father was arrested on trumped-up charges and died in custody. In 2019, the car in which the girl was travelling was hit by a truck; she survived, her aunts did not. The case was then transferred out of UP to a Delhi court that sentenced Sengar to life imprisonment.

Then, on December 23, 2025 a two-judge Delhi High Court bench ruled on what seemed to be technical quibbling over whether Sengar was a "public servant" (higher degree of punishment) or not. Not a public servant, ruled the judges and suspended his sentence.

The survivor, her family and activists protested at India Gate — or tried to before Delhi police whisked them away. The CBI challenged the order and the Supreme Court ruled that Sengar would continue in jail.

Should we celebrate that we've dodged yet another travesty of justice? As 2025 came to an end, a court in Ernakulam finally convicted six men of raping and abducting a woman actor in 2017, but found no evidence against the actor Dileep, who the woman says hatched the plan. The acquittal came as Dileep's new film was released.

Even when they are convicted, the powerful wriggle their way around. How many times has Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh been out on parole? How does self-styled godman Asaram Bapu, serving a life sentence for raping a minor, keep getting interim bail extended?

And can we ever forget the image of men who gang-raped a pregnant Bilkis Bano during the 2002 Gujarat riots being feted as they were released on remission? It was public outrage again that sent them back to jail.

It's not that justice is never served. It's just that it is served conveniently, depending on who the survivor is and who is the perpetrator. So, all the accused in the rape and murder of a Dalit girl in Hathras are acquitted. The juvenile who had originally accused then wrestling head Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexual assault takes back her statement.

Of the seven women who filed rape complaints in the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, one died before trial could be concluded, five retracted, and, in the end, only one remained. It took nine years and three Supreme Court interventions before her testimony packed off the accused to jail.

Rape is a crime against society and not just one woman. Justice should not ask for this level of courage from survivors. But it does, and still there are women who fight on. These are the women we should celebrate. These are the unsung heroes who give me hope.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

A New Year resolution: Eschew comparisons

Abhishek Asthana

"So, where did you go for New Year's?" is a question usually asked by people who have just come back from an elaborate trip abroad. They just wait for you to finish your response, so that they can bamboozle you with every tiny detail of their trip to Vietnam. Mostly, how they booked a beach-facing villa at the price of a masala dosa. And how the fruits were so juicy. It's followed by a rant about India's lack of civic sense, clean air and high-quality agri-produce.

Usually, such answers are often prefixed with a "nothing much", as if the person is not impressed by their own prosperity, their own tourism. "This was a last-minute plan," pat comes a disclaimer, lest you judge. Their family has already sent cumulatively 77,000 Instagram stories your way, yet the guy assumes you might be dying for his in-person commentary. Usually, a story of tourism is not actually about the place, it is mostly about how smart the tourist is. Ever the credit-card-point harvester, our man loves upgrades.

Thanks to our service economy, our holidays and time-outs are synced to those of our western clients. So, when the first out-of-office auto response from a Julia hits your inbox, it's time to declare holidays for white-collar natives. Even if you are in a profession that has nothing to do with the West, there is still pressure to partake in this global holiday. Much of this fear of missing out (FOMO) is induced by social media. Now, you have access to every school/college friend, every living colleague. You might not have talked in 20 years, but you very well know, Neha from your 10th standard prefers her husband behind the camera, while they roam the world. You also know which political party she voted for. A year ago, you sent a silent follow request, she accepted it out of courtesy, nobody spoke a thing, yet both of you became a silent co-passenger in each other's life journeys. It's beautiful until it's not.

Instagram gives you the impression everybody around you is travelling this New Year. It's a case of classic selection bias. Only those who are travelling are putting up stories. The ones who are at home are, well, at home.

This is also true of success. You seem to think everyone else is succeeding, making you disheartened. Especially the ones who once formed your peer group. Actually, only those guys who got promoted are putting up those LinkedIn posts. The rest are silently reading it like you. This is the red flag one should be watchful of. Avoid the trap of comparison; the algorithm gives you a much larger sample size. Now, you have access to everyone, and that brings misery more often than not.

As those auto-rickshaw-stickers put it: Comparison is the thief of joy

New years are also the time to answer the question: Are you a "Happy New Year" person or a "same to you" person? Introverts, like myself, dislike this sudden social pressure. Most of us are rarely the first movers in the New Year wishing rituals; we are the "same to you" guys. Naturally, closing such loops of wishing-back-everyone-who-wished-you feels cumbersome. Birthdays are even worse. You can't do the same-to-you routine.

I have a thumb rule: People who wish you before January 2 are genuinely wishing a "Happy New Year"; post this date, if they are wishing you "Happy New Year", they are most likely going to ask for a favour. This always works. It's the first ice-breaker which, like ice, melts away with time.

Fortunately, I didn't put on any more weight last year, thanks to playing regular sports and an inherited metabolic rate. The money I saved on Ozempic has been invested in more eclectic pursuits. I have picked a *Bhagawad Gita* challenge, where a group of us are going to read one chapter a day for the next 18 days. A Gita Press copy, which comes recommended, is the choice of translation. The intent is not to rush through: If it takes longer than 18 days, it's fine. Going by how 2025 has been, we should all be prepared for wars, both internal and external. On that note, wishing you a "same to you". Stay healthy. Avoid comparisons. Be happy.

Abhishek Asthana is a tech and media entrepreneur, and tweets as @gabbbarsingh. The views expressed are personal

Much of the fear of missing out (FOMO) is induced by social media. AFP

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Europe & India: Need closer ties

This is in reference to "The case for closer ties between India & Europe" by Avinash Paliwal (December 28). Amid the global mood of distrust, both Europe and India, through their prefernce for multilateralism and multiculturalism, can show the world that collaboration is the only way forward.

Avantika Datar

Language and culture, a matter of nuance

This is with reference to "When what's said isn't what's meant" by Karan Thapar (December 28). For those raised on more direct forms of English, the layered politeness of the British can be confusing, even though it reflects a culture that values restraint over confrontation. Understanding what is meant is an essential life skill.

Sanjay Chopra

Nalanda and education in modern India

This is with reference to "The present needs the spirit of ancient Nalanda" by Pavan K Varma (December 28). The ideals of the original Nalanda university must be revived to make India a true bastion of knowledge.

Ninad Deshpande

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When the job guarantee disappears

AS THE CENTRE REPLACES MGNREGA WITH CENTRALLY DESIGNED VB-GRAMG, IT QUIETLY DISMANTLES A RIGHTS-BASED EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE, PUTTING RURAL WOMEN'S LIVELIHOODS AT RISK

— by ASHRAF PULIKKAMATH, ANJITHA GOPI

For many rural women, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is more than just a government scheme. It is often the only reliable source of income they can access locally, predictably, and without having to negotiate with contractors, landlords, or male intermediaries. In our field engagements, women repeatedly described MGNREGA as their sole means of survival, given their limited social and economic privilege, weak bargaining power in labour markets, and constrained agency within families and communities.

It is against this lived reality that the Union government's proposal to replace MGNREGA with a new law, the Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) or VB-GRAMG, must be examined. While official communication highlights an increase in guaranteed workdays from 100 to 125, media reports reveal that this numerical expansion is accompanied by a deeper restructuring of funding, governance, and entitlement.

Together, these changes alter the very character of the programme. What is being presented as reform increasingly resembles a shift from a rights-based employment guarantee to a centrally managed village programme.

Women & Work

Women have consistently formed the backbone of MGNREGA. They account for nearly 60% of total person-days generated nationally, with States such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu recording women's participation levels as high as 90%. This was not incidental.

MGNREGA worked for women precisely because it recognised structural constraints such as limited mobility, unpaid care responsibilities, caste-based exclusion, and weak negotiating power in informal labour markets. By guaranteeing wage employment close to home and on demand, MGNREGA functioned as both a social protection measure and a labour market correction. For Dalit and Adivasi women in particular, it offered rare recognition of their labour as paid work rather than invisible service. Crucially, this recognition was backed by law. If work was demanded and not provided, workers were entitled to an unemployment allowance. The guarantee was enforceable, not discretionary.

Expansion, Erosion

VB-GRAMG replaces MGNREGA's demand-driven architecture with pre-fixed, normative allocations determined annually by the Centre, alongside expenditure ceilings. Once these allocations are exhausted, the guarantee effectively ends.

This shift has far-reaching gendered consequences. Under MGNREGA, demand itself created a legal obligation on the State. Under VB-GRAMG, employment becomes conditional on budgets, ceilings, and administrative discretion. When funds run out, rights run out. For women workers who already face barriers in accessing local power structures, this dilution of justiciability disproportionately weakens their ability to claim work.

Unequal Impact

Another significant departure lies in work availability. The proposed framework mandates a suspension of public works for up to 60 days during peak agricultural seasons. This is justified as a measure to prevent labour shortages in farming. However, it rests on the assumption that rural workers are uniformly cultivators who can absorb income shocks during these periods.

For most women workers, this assumption does not hold. The majority do not own land. Agricultural seasons do not reduce their workload; they intensify unpaid care, subsistence, and household labour.

MGNREGA's year-round availability mattered precisely because it allowed women to smooth incomes when other work was unavailable or exploitative. A uniform seasonal pause does not operate neutrally. It redistributes risk onto women whose labour remains undervalued or entirely unrecognised during so-called peak seasons.

Stress on States

The fiscal restructuring is equally significant. The shift from 100% central funding of unskilled wages under MGNREGA to a 60:40 Centre–State cost-sharing model for most States under VB-GRAMG is framed as cooperative federalism. In practice, it transfers fiscal stress downward to State governments.

States with constrained finances may be compelled to ration workdays, delay wage payments, or quietly scale back implementation. Employment guarantees that primarily benefit women, especially poor, Dalit, and Adivasi women, are often the first to be compromised under such pressures. What was once a nationally backed right becomes contingent on State budgets and shifting political priorities.

Local Voice

VB-GRAMG also marks a governance shift. While MGNREGA entrusted Gram Sabhas and Panchayats with identifying works based on local needs, VB-GRAMG institutionalises centralised digital stacks, GIS mapping, dashboards, and automated audits. Local priorities are increasingly filtered through national templates.

For women workers, this transition is not merely technical. Digital exclusion, biometric failures, and weak grievance redress mechanisms have already been documented under existing welfare architectures. Making such systems statutory risks exclusion without appeal, reducing workers to data points rather than rights-bearing citizens. Decentralisation gives way to central control, even as implementation risks are devolved to states.

Social Audits

The new law promises stronger monitoring and transparency mechanisms. Yet the effectiveness of social audits, one of MGNREGA's most significant democratic innovations, depends on the presence of enforceable rights.

Under MGNREGA, social audits created collective forums where workers, many of them women, could publicly question denial of work, delayed wages, and administrative lapses. These spaces mattered because the law recognised employment as an entitlement. Once employment itself becomes conditional and capped, social audits risk being reduced to procedural exercises, closer to financial audits than democratic accountability.

Field Realities

Over the past year, we have been studying MGNREGA's impact on the ground across Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu through field engagements, worker interactions, and local-level observations. These regions, often cited as relatively better-performing States in terms of MGNREGA implementation and women's participation, offer critical insight into what is at stake when the nature of the programme itself is altered.

Women we engaged with in Andhra Pradesh were unequivocal. MGNREGA is often the only form of work they can access without migration, indebtedness, or dependence on male intermediaries.

Their limited negotiating power within households, labour markets, and village institutions means alternatives are either unavailable or deeply exploitative. For these women, MGNREGA wages are not supplementary income. They are subsistence. Any dilution of the guarantee, therefore, has immediate consequences, pushing women back into economic dependence, unpaid labour, and informal work arrangements that offer neither security nor dignity.

What's at Stake

Critics argue that VB-GRAMG removes the soul of a rights-based employment guarantee, replacing it with a centrally controlled, conditional scheme that shifts costs to States but allows the Centre to gain political recognition. From a gender perspective, this loss is particularly stark.

MGNREGA was not merely an asset-creation programme. It was an acknowledgement that employment itself is social protection, and that women's labour deserves public remuneration backed by law. The move towards VB-GRAMG is, therefore, not just a policy redesign, but a reframing of rural labour, from a right to be claimed to a resource to be managed.

In this transition, women risk disappearing from policy imagination, from accountability mechanisms, and eventually from guaranteed paid work. Reclaiming MGNREGA's original intent is not only a question of administrative design. It is a gender justice imperative.

As MGNREGA is recast from a legal right into a conditional programme, the question that remains is simple: who absorbs the risk when the guarantee disappears, and why is it almost always rural women?

(Dr Ashraf Pulikkamath and Dr Anjitha Gopi are Assistant Professors at Vellore Institute of Technology–Andhra Pradesh (VIT-AP) University, Amaravati. They are currently working on MNREGA's impact in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu)

MGNREGA Vs VB-GRAMG

LEGAL GUARANTEE

MGNREGA	VB-GRAMG
Provides legally enforceable, on-demand employment; failure to provide work entitles workers to unemployment allowance	Employment conditional on budgets and ceilings; no guaranteed entitlement once funds are exhausted or allocated

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

MGNREGA:	VB-GRAMG
Empowers women through flexible, local work opportunities; addresses mobility, care responsibilities, and wage recognition	Centralised systems risk excluding women; digital and bureaucratic mechanisms reduce accessibility and local decision-making

WORK AVAILABILITY

MGNREGA	VB-GRAMG
Year-round availability ensures a steady income, especially during agricultural off-seasons or exploitative informal employment periods	Work may pause up to 60 days during peak agricultural seasons, leading to income instability for women

FUNDING

MGNREGA	VB-GRAMG
Fully centrally funded for unskilled wages; ensures consistent disbursement regardless of state financial capacity	Cost-sharing model (60:40) transfers fiscal stress to States; may ration work or delay wage payments

PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE

MGNREGA	VB-GRAMG
Local Gram Sabhas and Panchayats plan works based on community priorities; encourages participatory democracy	Centralised dashboards, GIS mapping, and automated audits dominate; local voices filtered through national templates

ACCOUNTABILITY AND AUDITS

MGNREGA	VB-GRAMG
Social audits enforce rights; women publicly question denial of work, wage delays, and administrative lapses	Audits risk becoming procedural; conditional employment reduces enforceable rights, limiting democratic oversight

NATURE OF EMPLOYMENT

MGNREGA	VB-GRAMG
Employment treated as social protection and legal right; supports subsistence and dignity for marginalised women	Labour reframed as resource to manage; risk shifts to States and vulnerable women, undermining security

WHEN FUNDS RUN OUT, RIGHTS RUN OUT

Under MGNREGA, demand itself created a legal obligation on the State. Under VB-GRAMG, employment becomes conditional on budgets, ceilings, and administrative discretion

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Sunroof antics: A reckless trend that endangers lives

Of late, we have been increasingly witnessing children standing with their heads out of car sunroofs while the vehicle is in motion. This is an extremely dangerous practice aided by irresponsible parents; it might result in grievous injuries or even fatalities. The sunroof was actually invented for use in Scandinavian nations which are sunlight-deficient, but is a worthless feature in India, where avoiding the fierce tropical sun is the greater challenge. Adults too are seen doing crazy stuff, with their bodies leaning out of the car hatch. Hope all concerned recognise the hazardous nature of such pursuits and avoid them.

REKHA SARIN, *Benaulim*

Make birth certificate the primary ID for every Indian

In India, the birth certificate must serve as the foundational primary ID document primarily for establishing date of birth (DOB) and citizenship, but its mandatory use as a "primary ID" for all purposes depends on an individual's birth date and the specific government service required.

For individuals born in India, the birth certificate card must be the sole mandatory document as ID for various services, including school admission, passport issuance, and voter registration. Aadhaar, PAN, or ration cards and the birth certificate should be officially recognised by the government as ID and valid proof of Indian citizenship with photo.

Because standard birth certificates do not contain a photograph, they are often not accepted as a standalone "Proof of Identity" (PoI) for services requiring visual verification, such as opening bank accounts or boarding certain flights.

What is this? Indian Birth Certificate Card (IBCC) should be the primary ID henceforth in India, followed by all cards. Most people do not have birth certificates; those should be registered with due inquiry for compliance. Another patriotic option of ID name is Bharat Birth Certificate Card (BBCC).

The Indian Birth Certificate Card (IBCC) ID should be made useful to facilitate several other essential Indian documents, like Aadhaar enrolment, which is used as foundational proof of date of birth and relationship (PoR) for children.

Voter registration, which is required to establish age for enrolment in electoral rolls. School admissions, which become necessary to verify age and identity for initial enrolment. Marriage registration, which becomes mandatory to confirm both parties meet the legal age requirements, and so on. But IBCC must become the primary ID card for all formalities to become a genuine Indian citizen, with all digital information on a scanner to trace bogus citizens of India and to have governmental privileges. Bring a policy of one Bharat, one ID—an Indian Birth Certificate Card (IBCC) ID or BBCC, an Indian identification.

RAJESH BANAULIKAR, *Arpora*

Corporate bank loan write-offs expose brazen money heist

The Modi government's money heist is on full display. In a reply to an unstarred question in the Lok Sabha, Pankaj Chaudhari, the MoS (Finance), stated that during the last five years, public sector banks have written off Rs 6,15,647 crore in bad loans. Imagine that!

So who actually gained from these massive write-offs? Not farmers. Not small traders. Not MSMEs. Not ordinary borrowers.

The biggest beneficiaries have been the large corporate friends of Modi, whose bad loans quietly disappear from the books. It's a cosy quid pro quo arrangement between the crony capitalists who fund the BJP juggernaut and Modi, while common citizens are chased down for every single rupee. Some even go to the extent of committing suicide, unable to face the harassment from recovery agents/goons. For the PM, the country be damned; his rich friends' interests should be protected in India and abroad. Peak dosti.

VINAY DWIVEDI, *Benaulim*

Delhi needs clean air, not a new name

I do not understand why the Government of India is inclined towards proposals such as renaming New Delhi, which is in the pipeline after the "Gandhi" fixation. This move seems driven more by emotive appeal than by a coherent development agenda. Renaming cities is one thing, and renaming a national capital is quite another thing.

History and mythology aside, there is neither urgency nor a clear necessity for such a change. The foremost priority should be to fix Delhi's chronic pollution problems on a war footing, which have caused many chronic breathing diseases among Delhi residents, rather than focusing on symbolism. As Shakespeare famously wrote, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet."

Renaming is a blindness game...
As politicians play the blame game.
Pollution and smog have choked the city;
can change of name make it less smoggy...
That once was graceful and vibrant.
Alas, our capital city stands tall in shame.

DIOMEDES ROMANO PEREIRA, *Corlim-Ilhas*

Selective law enforcement undermines public trust

I would like to bring to your attention a serious and ongoing issue concerning the selective enforcement of laws in Goa, particularly with respect to sealed private clubs, illegal nightlife activities, and the apparent failure of authorities to act against influential lawbreakers.

If permissions have not been granted by the concerned departments, it is deeply concerning that sealed clubs continue to operate openly. This raises serious questions about why government authorities and the police have failed to take action against those violating the law. The situation gives an unfortunate impression that political influence and monetary power are being used to bypass legal systems.

There is a visible contradiction in the statements made by elected representatives and ministers, who speak strongly in the media yet fail to act on the ground. This has created a widespread perception that laws and rules apply strictly to common citizens, while wealthy businessmen and powerful individuals are allowed to function above the law.

Traditional Goan weddings and local events are forced to stop by 10 pm due to noise regulations, whereas private clubs and parties continue throughout the night with loud music, disturbing the peace and sleep of local residents. Despite repeated violations, there appears to be no accountability from the police department or other authorities.

Furthermore, there is a growing concern among Goans regarding demands for "hafta" amounts running into lakhs of rupees, which indicates a serious breakdown of law and order and deep-rooted corruption.

It is extremely painful to see that the voices of ordinary Goans are being ignored, while decisions seem to be influenced by those carrying heavy suitcases of money. Public safety, the rule of law, and innocent lives appear to be treated as secondary concerns.

I urge the government and concerned departments to take immediate and transparent action, ensure equal enforcement of the law, and restore public trust by standing firmly against corruption and illegal activities.

RONNIE D'SOUZA, *Chandor-Salcete*

Indian gig workers deserve rights, not just ratings

The strike by a section of gig workers on New Year's Eve may not have caused major disruptions across the country, but it has done enough to turn the spotlight on their key demands for better payouts, a ban on ultra-fast delivery, and improved working conditions. The absence of paid leave, health insurance, accident cover, and retirement benefits, which leaves workers vulnerable to economic shocks, are the other challenges they face. With over 12.7 million such workers in India today, and the number projected to reach 23.5 million by 2030, the sector is no longer a stranger to other businesses. What began as flexible, side-income work has become a full-time livelihood for millions. Yet workers remain classified as "partners" or "independent contractors", which allows platforms to avoid basic employer responsibilities.

Ignoring gig workers' demands risks social unrest, economic precarity, and the normalisation of exploitation. It is necessary, however, for companies to acknowledge that gig workers form the backbone of their operations. Even as they work to maximise profit for their shareholders, they need to listen to the concerns of workers. Besides being service providers, they are workers in every sense. Policy must catch up with reality.

GREGORY FERNANDES, *Mumbai*

Christmas attacks: Silence of BJP leaders is alarming

The Catholic Association of Goa (CAG) has made a detailed representation to the Governor of Goa, urging him to intervene with the President of India and the Union Government over what it described as a disturbing rise in targeted violence and intimidation against Christians across the country, particularly during the Christmas period.

Many opposition leaders had earlier already come forward to raise their voices against these same attacks on Christians and attempts to disrupt Christmas celebrations in different parts of the country (especially in BJP-ruled states), saying such incidents undermine India's constitutional guarantees and long-standing tradition of religious harmony.

Shockingly, our Goan Catholic BJP MLAs/leaders (who otherwise are quick to issue their own statements when it comes to attacking the Church and priests in the state on small issues like sermons, to defend their party) have still not bothered to issue a single statement condemning the above attacks on Christians.

Why? Because the goons who carried out these attacks/disrupted Christmas celebrations in some parts of India belonged to their own BJP party-affiliated right-wing organisations like the VHP and Bajrang Dal?

Well, the BJP-backed right-wing goons have no damn bloody right to tell the Christian community not to celebrate their Christmas festival with people of other faiths, citing their own foolish reasons, or which religion they should choose, practise, and follow by flexing their muscles across India, because it's none of their business, as following any religion is one's personal matter/choice. And that right has been fully given to every citizen living in this country and is still protected/guaranteed in the Indian Constitution, which no one can take away.

Our 'darpok' minority MLAs/leaders from the BJP in the state should therefore come to their bloody senses and dare to raise their voice against the 'ghandu-mamus' cum mentally disturbed roadside jobless goons of right-wing organisations belonging to their own party, rather than staying silent and allowing them to give their own certificates of other people's ancestral identity cum religion based on their own personal imaginary beliefs/assumptions by terrorising minorities to enjoy their own ache-din in Goa and to turn this secular country into another fundamentalist country like Pakistan or Bangladesh, if not Afghanistan and Syria. Long live Secular India.

JERRY FERNANDES, *Saligao*

Protect tourists, or risk ruining the industry

Tourism is a very sensitive, eco-friendly, money-spinning, hospitality, showcasing, excellent-infrastructure, attractive and viable, culture-friendly, knowledge-exchanging-based industry. We have to spruce up all our roads, beaches, markets and available infrastructure to tone up or spike arrivals, both old and new.

Beach crimes like rape, molestation and female eye-gazing should be dealt with punitively and must not be spared. Tourist police for specific purposes must be put in place.

Sanitation and cleanliness are of utmost importance to attract tourists. Eateries and food vendors must ensure that their spaces are maintained at the highest standards of cleanliness and hygiene. They should guard their processed food from attacking flies, mosquitoes, other parasites of the insect world, and also lizards that intrude for a quick bite. They should also take utmost precautions to ensure fire and safety norms are in place, with pre-emptive measures to deter any sort of fire hazards towards the infrastructure of all hotels and eateries.

Fire extinguishers must be made mandatory in every nightclub, hotel, pub, inn, etc. Vandalism and violence occurring at certain places will ruin the tourism industry inside out, and many will go bankrupt. Tourists hate to come to places of spiritual disturbance, especially in areas of worship. Old and new relationships between clients and owners of establishments play a pivotal role in shoring up tourist arrivals.

Culinary delights also play an attractive role; some come just to taste these delicious savoury dishes over and over again. Various languages play an important part in bringing in old and new tourists repeatedly. Minimal cess collection is required to clean up the mess left behind on beaches, markets and roads, which have to be maintained spick and span (clean) throughout the day.

The interiors of towns, like markets and bus stands, are as filthy as ever, which necessitates the need to place gigantic-sized dustbins all over. Pavements and roads should be pothole-free and filled with good-quality bitumen at all times. Tourists' holidays should be made more memorable in order to gain their trust and appeal to keep them coming over again.

ASHLEY NORONHA, *Fatorda*

Modernising CPI for the digital age

To improve the accuracy, reliability, and overall quality of the Consumer Price Index (CPI), online sources and e-commerce platforms will now be included in the calculation of retail inflation. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation is also in the process of revising the "base year" for the calculation of CPI, the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), and Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In addition to collecting data from physical retail outlets under the existing system, prices will also be gathered from e-commerce platforms in 12 selected cities with populations exceeding 2.5 million. Furthermore, support from various government departments will be taken to obtain administrative data.

This includes railway fare data from the Ministry of Railways, fuel prices from the Ministry of Petroleum, and postal charges from the Department of Posts. Prices of air travel, telecommunications services, and OTT platforms will be collected from online sources using web-based methods.

Web-based and administrative data will enable faster, more regular, and cost-effective price collection. Digital data will help reduce recording and sampling errors commonly found in traditional surveys. The use of data from multiple sources will enhance the credibility of statistics and strengthen public trust. In the future, expansion of online data coverage to rural areas could help achieve regional balance in inflation measurement. Digital data measurement is essential in the present digital era.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR, *Mumbai*

PERSPECTIVE ››

Can Goa afford a third district amid rising debt?

Goa's total outstanding debt in 2026 is estimated at about Rs 25,163 crore, which equals roughly 18% of the state's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). From the CAG's perspective in 2026, Goa's debt is not healthy. While the state government projects a more moderate debt-to-GSDP ratio (~18%), the CAG's audit shows that once hidden liabilities are included, the burden is closer to 30% of GSDP, breaching statutory limits. This mismatch highlights the need for urgent fiscal discipline and transparent debt management.

With all these facts, the question arises whether there was really a need to create a third district, "Kushavati", at this point. Also, with the first two districts, North and South Goa, so poorly managed, could the money not be used to bring these two to satisfactory standards, including better accessibility for the people in the proposed third district?

With the increasingly digital age, there is less need for more brick-and-mortar investments, and existing infrastructure could have been much better utilised. I will use AQI (Air Quality Index) to summarise my other main point of opposition. This proposed third district will surely have AQI much better than other parts of Goa. What we have seen, particularly with this BJP government, is that progress/development actually means more real estate development, which is destroying the environment of Goa in general; and it is a fact that real estate development seems to be the top priority of this destructive government.

I think this planned third district, Kushavati, will be the new/last frontier of rampant real estate development, and AQI will worsen to match the other two districts of Goa. And the latter is the actual intent of the Goan ruling ministers and MLAs.

ARWIN MESQUITA, *Colva*

SMART CITY, PRIMITIVE STANDARDS

Another day, another drain repair in Panaji. This close-up illustrates why the city's transformation has been met with such public ire. Between the "slapdash" execution and the zero-safety protocols, the work reflects a sorry state of affairs where quality and accountability are as absent as the worker's safety boots. Narayan Pissurlenkar

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New Delhi

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AGENDA

The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, that predicting the future is a very difficult business
– JK Rowling

The year 2026 is poised to be a period of profound transition, marked by shifting global dynamics, decisive political developments, and significant social and economic change. Influenced by emerging geopolitical realities, the year is expected to test leadership, reshape alliances, and redefine priorities at both national and international levels. Here are key predictions for 2026...

CRYSTAL BALL GAZING 2026

Regional Posture

With Mars influencing the Ascendant lord, Chinese assertiveness intensifies. Its strong national-sovereignty stance creates friction in Tibet, Bangladesh, and the Korean peninsula. Delhi and Beijing maintain dialogue, but underlying tension remains. China proactively strengthens ties with Pakistan & Bangladesh, expanding economic corridors and strategic cooperation in ways that could indirectly affect India and North Korea.

2026: An Astrological Perspective

PUNIT ALOK 'CHAVVI'

The Indo-Pacific region stands at a turning point. The combined influences of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and Rahu shape a future characterised by discipline, political realignments, guarded economic optimism, and intermittent turbulence. Astrology offers insight into the direction in which nations may move. This analysis examines three critical players — China, Russia, and India

CHINA: CONTROL, STRATEGIC EXPANSION, AND QUIET SOCIAL PRESSURE

At Beijing, the 13th degree of Capricorn rises in the Taurus Navamsa, reflecting rigidity, discipline, material ambition, and state-centred governance. A strong Jupiter aspect on the Ascendant signals outward stability, yet also indicates a repressive undertone. Spiritual and ideological movements may surface, but they will be swiftly curtailed whenever they appear to challenge state authority.

ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

The economy remains comparatively stable. Jobs increase primarily in large cities, and prices stay moderate. Tax concessions and support schemes provide relief to ordinary citizens. However, the ongoing transition towards a more market-based structure, intensified by Saturn's influence, creates social strain, inequality, and sporadic labour unrest.

FOREIGN RELATIONS AND SECURITY

China and the United States move towards a cautious, pragmatic coexistence - competition persists, yet both understand the cost of open confrontation. Internally, power struggles continue at the top levels of governance, and the possibility of significant seismic disturbances or environmental stress cannot be dismissed.

The astrological impact of Mars on North Korea suggests increased military expenditure and renewed determination to sustain its nuclear ambitions. External diplomatic pressure produces limited effect. South Korea, meanwhile, faces uncertainty, strained media institutions, and economic concerns extending into early 2026.

RUSSIA: TECHNOLOGY, ASSERTIVENESS

Russia's horoscope places Mercury strongly on the Ascendant, pointing towards expansion in communication, transport, media, information technology, and the oil-and-energy sector. Trade activity increases as economic channels reopen and diversify.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Russian foreign policy grows increasingly assertive, aiming to balance Western dominance. Relations with the United States remain tense, while diplomatic engagement with China strengthens. Ties with Pakistan experience disruptions, whereas Afghanistan receives increased military and strategic aid.

A significant development lies in Putin's concept of an India-Russia-China strategic triangle, likely to gain clearer form in the coming period. Russia warms considerably towards India, particularly in information technology, defence, and energy partnerships.

GOVERNANCE AND JUDICIAL ROLE

Government responses to militancy and subversive threats become firmer. The judiciary plays a dynamic and corrective role, exposing corruption and tightening administrative responsibility. Politicians accustomed to unrestricted behaviour are increasingly called to account. Saturn's placement suggests that labour and industrial sectors benefit from improved legislation and protections. Reforms bring stability, even if adjustments feel challenging.

CHALLENGES AND EXPOSURES

A fire at an arms-manufacturing facility reveals hidden criminal networks, prompting deeper investigation and institutional cleansing.

Meanwhile, prices of edible oils and essential commodities rise. The liquor industry faces labour conflicts and accidents, symbolising karmic correction for reckless profit practices.

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AND FOREIGN POLICY

The opposition appears uncertain and fragmented, lacking strategic cohesion. Centre-state relations fluctuate, but gradually evolve towards a balanced federal structure.

Diplomatically, India strengthens its role as a stabilising regional power:

- Relations with the United States improve significantly by mid-2026
- Ties with China remain largely steady with occasional friction
- Cooperation with Japan expands, especially in trade and technology
- Digital-intelligence collaboration with Israel grows
- The United Kingdom seeks deeper engagement
- Economic links strengthen with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand
- Europe also increases trade in food by-products and industrial cooperation with India.

Astrologically, the Indo-Pacific region enters a phase of transformation shaped by discipline, realignment, and strategic caution.

China tightens internal control while quietly managing social pressure and broadening strategic networks. India faces stern lessons – but emerges more resilient, reformed, and spiritually awakened.

Saturn demands responsibility, Jupiter offers wisdom, Mars tests courage, and Rahu exposes illusions.

(The writer is an expert practitioner in the field of Geo-Metaphysics Analysis since 1995. He also makes predictions based on a person's signature)

War and Diplomacy

Planetary combinations suggest the Ukraine conflict moving gradually towards negotiated stabilisation between July and September 2026. The outcome may not fully satisfy either side, yet it reduces bloodshed and opens the path to reconstruction.

However, former Soviet states continue to witness ethnic clashes and military hostilities, requiring Moscow's cautious involvement.

Russian Politics

President Vladimir Putin faces astrological pressure during eclipses and again when Mars and Saturn enter mutual aspect in 2027. These alignments indicate leadership struggles, criticism, and internal political challenges. Nevertheless, his position remains resilient rather than fragile.

Cultural Revival and Knowledge Systems

Jupiter's transit through air signs, combined with Rahu and Mars influences, revives interest in traditional methodologies, including:

- Agricultural planning
- Irrigation and water management
- Seismology and meteorology
- Counter-terrorism strategies
- Environmental protection
- Educational reform

The Krishna Janmabhoomi issue gains momentum, evoking strong cultural emotions and symbolic unity, especially around the lunar eclipse of 2026.

Science, Medicine, and Innovation

Strong planetary combinations in medical houses predict major breakthroughs, particularly in:

- Genetic research
- Neurological disorders
- Cardiac treatment
- Organ transplantation

Indian doctors and research teams gain international recognition, strengthening the nation's scientific profile.

India: Discipline, Reform, and National Awakening

India moves through a defining cycle influenced strongly by Saturn's transit through the Jupiter-ruled sign of Pisces. Saturn here behaves as a stern instructor, demanding accountability, moral discipline, and structural reform.

Looking ahead: An astrological outlook for the year 2026

S N VAJPAYEE

According to the planetary configurations for the year, Dev Guru Brihaspati (Jupiter) will assume the position of King, while Mars — the planet symbolising courage, strength, and energy — will serve as the Minister. This powerful combination of wisdom and valour is expected to bring about significant transformations at the global level. With Jupiter enthroned as King, society will witness a growing inclination towards religion, education, ethics, and spirituality. Positive initiatives in social reform and the justice system are likely, fostering greater tolerance and harmony in human interactions.

A revival of moral values can be anticipated, along with noticeable progress in worship, religious activities, and higher education. This period will be especially auspicious for professionals engaged in intellectual and service-oriented fields, including doctors, lawyers, journalists, bankers, teachers, and those involved in spiritual or scholarly pursuits, all of whom may experience notable growth and recognition.

Mars, as the Minister, will introduce a contrasting yet influential energy. Its aggressive nature may give rise to political instability, international tensions, and conflicts. Rulers may act with increased ruthlessness, and several nations could experience changes in power or heightened military activity. Climatically, excessive heat and drought-like conditions may affect certain regions. Governments will therefore need to exercise extreme caution in matters of foreign policy and economic planning. While economic reforms are indicated, market stability in 2026 is expected to improve compared to 2025. The wisdom of Jupiter is likely to temper the aggressiveness of Mars, opening pathways to progress even under adverse circumstances. Overall, this period will be highly influential for both personal and social development. Governments may implement stricter laws and adopt more authoritarian decisions. Conflicts, however, may manifest more as ethical or ideological battles rather than direct armed warfare, with rulers displaying their strength and assertiveness on the global stage. In 2026, major changes and regulatory reforms are expected in maritime trade, naval forces, oil, and pharmaceutical industries. During the first half of the year, nations may reach agreements on water-sharing treaties and trade pacts. In contrast, the second half may see governments asserting their power more openly, with nationalism emerging as a strong sentiment.

From India's perspective, Jupiter's exalted position signifies increased valour, prosperity, and achievement. India is likely to attain notable success in initiatives such as Make in India, space technology, and defence. However, the government may need to take firm and decisive steps regarding border-related issues.

Agriculturally, the year may be challenging due to a lack of natural moisture, resulting in smaller and lighter food grains and reduced crop yields. Mustard crops may be affected by lice infestation, leading to lower oil production. While the output of flowers and fruits may be higher, insect damage could reduce their quality. Sugarcane crops may suffer from increased worm infestation. Animal diseases are likely to rise, potentially reducing milk production. On the positive side, this year is expected to be favourable for traders.

In April 2026, there may be a rise in natural diseases, possibly with high intensity. September could witness extreme heat, leading to an increase in stomach ailments, fevers, and eye-related disorders. By November, skin-related diseases may become more prevalent. Regarding air pollution, levels are expected to rise naturally starting from October 27, 2026. A particularly severe increase is anticipated between 8 November and 14, November, after which pollution may decrease slightly.

CONTINUED ON >> PII

Severe AQI and my right to breathe

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

RAJEEV KUMAR

For generations, we have been taught that Nature maintains a balance: humans and animals exhale carbon dioxide, which trees absorb through photosynthesis, helping to keep the air clean. Planting trees was therefore seen as a simple way to offset population growth and preserve air quality. However, modern development and industrialisation have overwhelmed this natural balance. Today, humans and machines emit a complex mix of pollutants-fine particulate matter (PM), toxic gases, and biological contaminants-that trees alone cannot absorb or neutralise. Air pollution has thus become a systemic problem that cannot be solved by afforestation or cosmetic clean-up measures; it requires systematic prevention of emissions at source. Over the past decade, Delhi and its adjoining regions have experienced rapid urbanisation and economic growth, accompanied by a sharp deterioration in air quality. Population expansion, explosive growth in vehicular traffic, industrial activity, large-scale construction, and biomass use across the National Capital Region (NCR) have together released vast quantities of pollutants and dust. Seasonal meteorological conditions-especially winter inversions-trap these emissions, pushing air quality to hazardous levels for prolonged periods and often rendering the city virtually unliveable, with serious public health consequences.

Delhi-NCR's air pollution is primarily driven by toxic emissions from routine economic activities. Multiple source-apportionment studies consistently show that vehicular emissions contribute about 40 per cent, industrial sources around 20 per cent, construction dust nearly 20 per cent, power plants roughly 5 per cent, and the remainder approximately 10 per cent from residential and other sources, including biomass burning. Together, vehicles, industries, and power plants account for nearly two-thirds of the pollution load and form the most significant component of air pollution. These emissions are rich in carbon-, nitrogen-, and sulphur-based compounds and generate fine particulates such as PM2.5 and PM1, which penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream. Unlike seasonal contributors, these sources operate year-round; winter merely concentrates what is already present.

Yet public discourse often fixates on stubble burning, creating a misplaced blame game. Data from the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, show that farm fires contribute only about 3-4 per cent of PM2.5 during October-December, and this share has been declining over time. While biomass burning is episodic, the most toxic pollution originates from non-seasonal sources, including vehicles, industries, and construction. The real danger lies in fine particulates (PM2.5 and PM1), not coarse PM10. Treating stubble burning as the main villain obscures the persistent sources of toxic air and delays meaningful action where it matters most.

Health Hazards

Toxic air dominated by PM2.5 and PM1 poses severe and lasting health risks. These particles penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream through inhalation and even skin exposure. Once lung function is impaired, the damage is generally irreversible; treatment may slow the decline or ease symptoms, but it cannot restore destroyed airways. By the time breathlessness becomes visible, the window for meaningful intervention has often closed. Lung transplants exist for terminal COPD, but they are neither scalable nor a path to everyday life for most patients. India bears a uniquely heavy burden.

Population studies consistently show that Indians have among the poorest adult lung function globally, driven primarily by environmental exposure rather than genetics. Many begin adulthood with reduced lung reserve and experience faster decline with age. Unlike Western countries, where smoking dominates COPD risk, India's epidemic is primarily driven by outdoor and indoor air pollution. Non-smoking women exposed to biomass fuels and urban residents breathing vehicle emissions, construction dust, and industrial pollutants year-round are especially vulnerable.

Prolonged exposure has transformed air pollution into a slow-moving public health crisis. When the AQI exceeds 400, and PM2.5 gets around 200, even healthy individuals suffer measurable harm, while children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing conditions face severe and often irreversible damage. The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change, prepared in collaboration with the WHO, estimates that 1.7 million deaths in India in 2022 were attributable to PM2.5 exposure, primarily from fossil fuel combustion.

The author's personal experience-long-standing asthma worsening into severe COPD after moving to Delhi, ultimately costing his wife her life at a premier medical institution-underscores the human cost of prolonged exposure and the urgency of prevention.

Adding to the concern, a recent JNU study published in Nature detected high levels of antibiotic-resistant bacteria in Delhi's indoor and outdoor air, peaking during winter. Several strains were single- and multi-drug resistant, making infections more challenging to treat. Polluted air is thus not only a chemical hazard but also a biological one.

Despite this evidence, official acknowledgment remains limited. In parliamentary replies during 2024-25, the Ministries of Health and Environment stated that no deaths were reported due to air pollution, citing a lack of exclusive attribution. This disconnect between science and policy risks delaying effective public health action.

Pollute-and-Clean

Governance responses to air pollution have primarily relied on panic-driven, short-term interventions rather than sustained prevention measures. Measures such as smog towers, water sprinkling, episodic restrictions under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), "no fuel without PUCC" (Pollution Under Control certificate), bans on non-Bharat Stage-VI (BS6) vehicles, the use of so-called green crackers, school closures, work-from-home advisories, and vehicle rationing are routinely rolled out during pollution peaks. While highly visible, these actions operate on a limited spatial and temporal scale. Smog towers and sprinklers may briefly displace pollutants, but they do not reduce emissions at source or deliver lasting air-quality improvements for a megacity of tens of millions.

Institutional responses follow a predictable cycle. Committees are formed, reports restate well-known causes and remedies, and announcements are made-often just as winter recedes and meteorological conditions improve naturally. Pollution levels then fall marginally, creating an illusion of success, even though air quality remains unsafe for most of the year except during rainfall. The pattern repeats annually: pollution spikes, emergency measures are imposed, temporary relief follows, and structural reforms are postponed.

This pollute-and-clean paradigm has repeatedly failed. Clean air cannot be achieved through cosmetic or reactive measures. Without rigorous prevention at source, every clean-up effort remains symbolic, and the crisis inevitably returns each winter.

Prevention at Source

There is no alternative to preventing pollution at its source. Sustainable air quality requires systematic, year-round control of emissions from vehicles, industries, construction, power generation, and energy use. This approach is time-tested. Beijing faced a similar crisis a decade ago. It achieved durable improvements through ultra-strict emission standards, the expansion of clean mobility, the phased removal of older vehicles, and the relocation of polluting industries-backed by decisive, science-based policies and consistent enforcement. Addressing air pollution, therefore, demands tough choices, long-term planning, and the political will to prioritise public health over short-term convenience.

India must likewise reject the pollute-and-clean cycle and commit to long-term prevention: strengthen public transport, enforce stringent emission norms, curb unchecked private vehicle growth, invest in clean energy and electric mobility, and relocate heavily polluting industries away from dense urban centres. These measures are complex and demanding, but they remain the only credible path to lasting improvement.

Effective pollution control must focus squarely on vehicular and industrial emissions-the most toxic and persistent components of urban air. Beijing's experience demonstrates that sustained enforcement and coordinated policy action, not cosmetic fixes, are what deliver durable gains.

The Way Forward

Policy action must be reinforced by a sustained civil movement grounded in individual and collective responsibility. Citizens can reduce emissions by shifting from private vehicles to public transport, shared mobility, and electric options. Communities can protect green spaces, curb construction dust, prevent waste burning, and limit the use of diesel generators. Visible citizen participation provides governance with both momentum and legitimacy to act decisively.

Lasting solutions demand a long-term strategy, substantial investment, and broad public acceptance. Governance must establish empowered, task-oriented bodies to assess feasibility, estimate costs, set timelines, and drive execution. What is required now is action on a war footing, grounded in science and technology, accountability, and shared responsibility across institutions, industry, and society. Only such coordinated and preventive action can break the cycle of recurring crises and deliver clean, breathable air as a fundamental public good.

(The writer is a former Professor of Computer Science at IIT Kharagpur, IIT Kanpur, BITS Pilani, and JNU, and a former scientist at DRDO and DST. He has contributed to technology development in India and abroad for over 45 years, spanning academia, R&D, and industry)

How the world tackles toxic air

Air pollution is not a unique Indian problem, it is a problem confronted by most countries but many have successfully handled it. Here is how:

Transportation Reforms

LOW-EMISSION ZONES (LEZS): Over 300 cities globally, including London, Berlin, and Jakarta, use LEZs to restrict or penalize high-emission vehicles. London's Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) has achieved an almost 50 per cent reduction in toxic nitrogen dioxide in central areas and expanded to all boroughs by late 2023.

ELECTRIFICATION OF PUBLIC TRANSIT: Cities like Delhi and Bengaluru are aggressively transitioning to electric buses; Delhi aims to electrify 80 per cent of its fleet with 8,000 electric buses planned by 2025-26. Bogota introduced 172 new electric buses to serve 30,000 commuters daily.

ACTIVE MOBILITY: Paris is implementing a plan to be 100 per cent bikeable by 2026. Similarly, Guadalajara and Quito have expanded cycle lanes significantly, with Quito seeing a 200 per cent increase in bike trips. Industrial and Residential Regulations

PHASING OUT SOLID FUELS: Beijing successfully reduced PM2.5 levels by 36 per cent in five years by replacing coal-fired boilers with natural gas or electricity and closing coal power plants. Warsaw established a ban on coal burning starting in 2023.

Industrial Emission Controls

India's National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) has mandated that thousands of polluting industrial units install Online Continuous Emission Monitoring Systems (OCEMS) by the end of 2025 to ensure year-round compliance.

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INDUSTRIAL EMISSION CONTROLS: India's National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) has mandated that thousands of polluting industrial units install Online Continuous Emission Monitoring Systems (OCEMS) by the end of 2025 to ensure year-round compliance.

Innovative Urban Planning

SUPERBLOCKS AND PEDESTRIAN ZONES: Barcelona uses the 'Superblock' model to reclaim streets from cars for pedestrians and green space. Zurich has capped parking spaces and increased car-free areas to prioritize tram lines.

Barcelona uses the 'Superblock' model to reclaim streets from cars for pedestrians and green space. Zurich has capped parking spaces and increased car-free areas to prioritise tram lines.

HIGH-DENSITY MONITORING: Warsaw operates one of Europe's largest sensor networks with 165 sensors to track pollution sources in real-time. Quezon City in the Philippines now has the country's largest monitoring network to provide data-driven policy insights.

WASTE MANAGEMENT: Cities like Jambi City (Indonesia) have banned waste burning and implemented methane-capture plans to prevent toxic smog from landfills. Emergency Response Frameworks Graded Response Action Plans (GRAP): Cities like Delhi use tiered response systems that automatically trigger construction bans, school closures, and truck entry restrictions when AQI levels reach 'severe' categories.

FROM AGENDA COVER

Looking ahead: An astrological outlook for the year 2026

From a political standpoint, 2026 appears to be a highly favourable year for India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. His global stature and reputation are likely to grow steadily.

However, this will require careful and practical diplomacy. By accommodating certain perspectives of countries such as China, Canada, Brazil, Germany, Japan, Argentina, and Algeria, and ensuring mutual agreement on key issues, diplomatic relations can be strengthened.

Maintaining distance from countries such as the United States, Britain, Australia, and Kazakhstan would not be advisable, despite the unpredictability of their current leadership. Their leaders may frequently shift positions, making long-term agreements unreliable. Any agreements made with Pakistan, by any country, are unlikely to be dependable.

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is less a conflict between two nations and more a confrontation between two rulers. As long as the reins of power in these two nations remain with their current leaders, the conflict is likely to continue in its present form..

Indian Politics

In the current year as well, Narendra Modi appears largely unchallenged and unafraid of political opposition. However, it is evident that the conduct of his party's current president may not align with or support his political style. From time to time, Modi may have to bear the consequences of this mismatch, even without any ill intent on his part. Circumstances may arise that again place him firmly in the position of Prime Minister in the future.

No dramatic turnaround is expected for the Congress party this year either. Before it can effectively challenge the ruling party, Congress must first regain its own political footing. Such a revival does not appear likely in the present year

Uttar Pradesh

Akhilesh Yadav has yet to gain full acceptance even within his own family. Without recognising this reality and strengthening his standing internally, it will be difficult for him to regain power in the state. For Mayawati, merely preserving the identity and relevance of her party this year would itself be a significant achievement.

Bihar

The political influence of Lalu Prasad Yadav's party was largely limited to 2025. Beyond that, it is expected to gradually lose momentum. Cooperation between Tejashwi Yadav and Tej Pratap Yadav appears unlikely. The Congress party has little presence in the state. Bihar is likely to move forward under the leadership of Chirag Paswan and Nitish Kumar.

Maharashtra

Devendra Fadnavis is expected to continue wielding power. If his position weakens, Ajit Pawar may emerge as a strong contender. Eknath Shinde has already served his one possible term as Chief Minister. Raj Thackeray and Uddhav Thackeray may maintain unity only as long as there is a realistic prospect of gaining power, which will not be easy.

West Bengal

This year may bring some relief for Mamata Banerjee from the pressures of power. Gradually, she is likely to designate her nephew as her successor and step back from active leadership. In time, her nephew may take on the role of leading the opposition under her guidance.

Delhi

There is a possibility of a change in power without elections. The current Chief Minister would do well to navigate the year 2026 with caution and stability.

(The writer is an eminent astrologer and holds a doctorate from BHU)

The season of abundance: How India's harvest festivals grace its table

ANIL RAJPUT

As the new year dawns in India and the Sun begins its northward journey, coinciding with the culmination of the winter harvest, the country enters a season of festive thanksgiving. January is marked by festivals like Pongal in the south, Lohri in the north, Magh Bihu in Assam, and Uttarayan or Makar Sankranti across much of the subcontinent, as an expression of shared joy and gratitude. While kitchens fill the air with the aroma of celebratory feasts, traditional attire is adorned with elegance, and timeless rituals reaffirm the customary bond between land, labour, and life.

The tradition of India's harvest festivals go back deep into the past, when agriculture was not merely an economic activity but the foundational principle of society. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley shows advanced agrarian planning, granaries, and seasonal patterns that were aligned with celestial events. Vedic literature repeatedly invokes anna (grain) as sacred, the very basis of life and social order. Hymns in the Rig Veda and later texts describe cycles of sowing and reaping as cosmic acts, linked to the movement of the Sun and the rains governed by Indra. The agrarian calendar determined not only food production but the festivities and rituals associated with them. The transition of the Sun into Makara, the zodiac sign of Capricorn, marked the end of the Dakshinayana (southward journey of the sun representing introspection and inward discipline) and the beginning of Uttarayana (northward journey of the sun signifying harvest, prosperity and progress), is a moment considered auspicious in the Hindu tradition. This cosmological shift coincides with the harvest of winter crops, creating a natural convergence of astronomy, agriculture, and ritual gratitude that continues to be observed through Indian festivals today.

Over centuries, these common agrarian philosophies were adapted by local histories, climates, and social structures, giving rise to regionally distinct yet principally uniform celebrations. In the fertile Cauvery delta, the Tamil harvest evolved into a four-day festival that honours the land, the farmer, cattle, and community in a carefully sequenced ritual cycle. In the floodplains of Assam, where rice cultivation defines both sustenance and identity, the harvest became a time of collective feasting, energetic folk dances and traditional music (Bihu Geet). In the northwestern plains, where wheat and sugarcane dominate and winters are harsh, bonfires emerged as a central symbol, offering warmth, protection, and a meeting place for festivities. In western India, where trade winds and open skies shape cultural life, the harvest season is witness to the spectacle of kites, transforming the sky into a canvas of color, strings and friendly competition. Despite differences in form, each festival emerged from the same historical assumption that survival depended on the soil, and the abundance it provided deserved reverence.

Religion, therefore, forms an integral part of the harvest festivals in India and is marked by prayers, recitations, hymns and expressions of gratitude and continued protection in the future. The local deities are adorned with splendid attire and decorated with flowers while incense fills the air. Colorful rangolis are meticulously designed in households using colored flour, grains, flower petals and natural pigments signifying auspiciousness, gratitude and welcoming of prosperity and harmony into homes. The Sun is thanked not as a celestial body but as a life-provider whose warmth and light ripens grain. Earth is honoured as a mother whose nutrients and fertility sustain growth. Cattle, essential partners in ploughing and transport, are washed, fed special foods, and worshipped. Rivers that nourish fields are also revered with offerings, prayers, and ritual bathing. Even tools and granaries are offered expressions of gratitude, acknowledging that human effort and natural forces are inseparable. These practices are uniform throughout the country and inclusive across different classes, religions and communities as if to reaffirm that the bounties of mother earth and nature are for all to share equally. The emphasis is on togetherness and on enjoyment after honest labour, a reminder that prosperity, when earned and shared, is itself a moral good.

Cuisine lies at the heart of these celebrations, serving as both offering to deities and sharing with family and friends that help to strengthen communal bonds. In the south, Sakkarai Pongal is prepared by slow-cooking fresh rice and lentils together until soft, before enriching them with jaggery, ghee, cashews, and aromatic spices. It is cooked outdoors or near windows on the first day of the festival, allowing the pot to overflow as a visible sign of abundance. This dish is first offered to the Sun and then shared within the household. Alongside it, Ven Pongal, a savoury counterpart made with rice, lentils, black pepper, cumin, and ghee, is eaten as a morning meal, combining simplicity with nourishment rather than excess. Ellu Sadam, prepared by tempering freshly harvested rice with roasted sesame seeds, jaggery, curry leaves, and ghee, is eaten on transitional days of the festival when prayers are offered for protection and peace in the year ahead. Its combination of sweetness and bitterness reflects the acceptance of life's dualities. Kalkandu Sadam, a rice preparation sweetened with crystallised sugar and enriched with milk and ghee, is traditionally served to children and elders, as a sign of continuity across generations. These dishes are consumed only after they are offered to deities reinforcing the idea that gratitude must precede celebration. Simple vegetable dishes are also prepared using ash gourd, pumpkin, and greens that are cooked with coconut and lentils, and shared during communal lunches. Pongal celebrations are accompanied by folk music and community dances such as kummi, kolattam, and parai drumming, expressing collective joy and gratitude for the harvest rather than as formal performances.

In eastern India, rice once again dominates, but in different forms determined by local climate and culture. In Assam, sticky rice varieties are transformed into compact cakes, roasted preparations, and fermented forms that can be eaten or even preserved for future use. Til Pitha, made by roasting ground sesame seeds with jaggery and covering them in thin rice-flour shells, is prepared during community gatherings and eaten during Magh Bihu evenings. Ghila Pitha, a fried rice-cake batter enriched with jaggery, is cooked in shallow pans and served warm, often shared with neighbours and visitors. Sunga Saul, is also a sticky rice dish cooked inside hollow bamboo over an open fire, and is prepared outdoors during feasts, eaten plain or with milk and jaggery. These foods are practical, portable, and deeply tied to community life, often prepared collectively by families and neighbourhoods. Chira Doi Gur, flattened rice soaked lightly in curd and jaggery, is a dish prepared as an early morning meal during Magh Bihu, offering nourishment before long hours of festivity. It requires minimal cooking, underscoring simplicity and taste. Narikol Pitha, rice cakes filled with coconut and jaggery, another favorite, are steamed or pan-cooked and shared during daytime visits of friends and relatives. The feasts are not confined to the household but spill into open spaces, as they are accompanied by dance, drumming, and song. The absence of elaborate spices in many of these dishes is deliberate, allowing the flavour of the new grain itself to take centre stage.

Northern India's harvest cuisine reflects a different agrarian rhythm, shaped by wheat fields and pastoral traditions. Flatbreads made from freshly milled flour are paired with rich preparations of greens, legumes, and dairy. Makki ki roti, made from freshly ground maize flour, is kneaded meticulously without yeast and cooked slowly on iron griddles, to be eaten during the Lohri and Sankranti period with seasonal vegetable preparations specially mustard greens. Til-gud laddus, prepared by roasting sesame seeds and binding them with melted jaggery, are most popular and exchanged between households, symbolising sweetness and goodwill. Rewri and gajak, brittle sweets of sesame, sugarcane derivatives, and nuts, are offered into a bonfire before being shared, symbolising fire as both witness and participant in the harvest ritual. These foods are eaten in the evenings, often outdoors, as families gather around fires in the cold northern winters, sing folk songs, and acknowledge the end of winter labour. Kheer, slow-cooked milk and rice mostly sweetened with jaggery and topped with diced dry fruits like almonds, is served after meals marking completion and contentment. Food here is robust and warming, designed to nourish bodies during winter and sustain labour-intensive lives. The communal nature of these meals reinforces social bonds, with neighbours exchanging dishes and extending hospitality beyond kinship lines.

In western India, the harvest season introduces a playful exuberance to the table. Puran Poli, a sweet flatbread filled with cooked lentils and jaggery, is prepared during Sankranti gatherings and served during midday meals. Its preparation process is elaborate, making it a dish of care befitting the occasion. Vangi Bharit, a roasted brinjal preparation mashed with sesame, garlic, and spices, accompanies millet rotis and is eaten during informal family meals. It relies heavily on seasonal produce and is often cooked on open fires making it ideal for open-air celebrations of the season. Seasonal vegetables, legumes, and grains are cooked simply, often with minimal spices, allowing texture and freshness to dominate. For desserts, sesame and jaggery come together in laddus and flatbreads that balance sweetness with crunch. The act of sharing these foods while flying kites turns rooftops and open fields into playing grounds filled with laughter and collective joy. Here, cuisine becomes more than sustenance and provides an occasion to bind communities together through the shared pleasure of festivals.

While celebrations in different parts of the country have their own distinctive identities, certain ingredients recur with striking consistency, revealing a pan-Indian preference and meaning. Rice and wheat represent sustenance and stability. Jaggery provides unrefined sweetness and purity, its production rooted in village economies rather than mechanised mills. Sesame, associated with warmth and longevity, appears in ritual foods and offerings. Milk and ghee symbolise nourishment, fertility, and purity. These ingredients are not chosen arbitrarily but reflect centuries of observation about health benefits, flavours and local availability in rural areas. Harvest cuisine is thus both celebratory and instructive, teaching simplicity, seasonality, and respect for resources even in moments of abundance.

In contemporary India, I am happy to see that many of us continue these traditions, though often reshaped by changing urban life-styles and modern schedules. Apartments replace courtyards, packaged sweets stand in for homemade ones, and agricultural labour is increasingly automated. Yet the symbolic power of the harvest season endures. Even in cities, people seek out seasonal foods, dress in traditional attire, and participate in rituals that reconnect them, however briefly, to their land. The resurgence of interest in millets, jaggery, artisanal grains, and regional cuisines reflects this growing awareness of the traditions of our ancestors that carry ecological and nutritional wisdom.

The harvest season, with all its gaiety, colour, music and invocations is not merely a festive interlude but a civilizational statement. It asserts that food is not a staple removed from its source but a relationship between soil, climate, labour, and society. It reminds us that gratitude is not an abstract virtue but a practice enacted through cooking, sharing, and remembering those who till the land. As India navigates the pressures of modernity, climate change, and industrial food systems, I believe that the ethos embodied in these festivals offer deep and profound meaning. To preserve these traditions of choosing balance over excess, community over isolation, and nourishment over indulgence is a responsibility we all should shoulder and pass on to our children and future generations. In celebrating the harvest, India does more than mark a season as it renews a commitment to live in harmony and respect the earth that sustains all of us.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)

Food security: The foundation for national stability, economic growth and public health

R K PACHNANDA

During his visit to Oman, the Prime Minister of India observed that food security is going to become a major global challenge in the coming years. He stated that, "Food security is as important as energy security."

The importance of food security has been well stressed in our ancient texts. And this is what our ancient scriptures have stressed upon. The Vedas, Upanishads, 'Bhagavad Gita' and texts like the 'Arthashastra' emphasise food security as foundational to life, society and spiritual well-being. Food (anna) is not merely sustenance but a divine principle intertwined with cosmic order, duty and prosperity. The Taittiriya Upanishad (part of the Yajur Veda) elevates food to the status of Brahman (the ultimate reality). It declares:

"Annam brahma" (Food is Brahman).

All beings arise from food, live by food, and return to it upon death.

The texts prescribe vows like:

"Annam na nindyat" (never scorn food).

"Annam bahu kurvita" (produce food in abundance).

This underscores food security as a moral and spiritual imperative: abundance prevents scarcity, fosters generosity and sustains life. The Bhagavad Gita (chapter 3) links food production to a divine cycle requiring human duty (karma) and sacrifice (yajna). The Vedas (e.g. Rig Veda and Atharva Veda) praise agriculture as essential, with hymns invoking deities for fertile fields, timely rains and bountiful harvests. Terms like 'ksetra' (field) and 'urvara' (fertile land) highlight systematic farming, irrigation and crop diversity.

Food security was fundamental to good governance as Kautilya linked food security with political stability. The relevance of food security in ancient times has lessons in tiding over difficult times, as this is a daunting challenge for our nation as well as the world. As we are well aware, agriculture was the backbone of the economy in ancient times and it was given primary importance. One of the most important agricultural policies laid down in the Arthashastra is the creation of new rural settlements (janapadanivesha). Kautilya identifies cultivators (karshakas) as vital to state prosperity. Private peasants were obliged to cultivate their fields. It was a punishable offence for a farmer to neglect or abandon his field at the time of sowing.

The state actively regulated grain markets to prevent hoarding, black marketing and artificial scarcity. Price controls ensured that food remained affordable, particularly for the poor. The state supervised markets through officials like the Panyadhyaksha (Superintendent of Trade) who would keep the traders under check. Five per cent profit on indigenous goods was allowed. For merchants who sought higher profit margins, for every additional 5 per cent the penalty was 200 panas. If the merchants were found conspiring to hoard food grains with the aim of selling at a higher price, they were to pay a fine of 1,000 panas. If brokers and middlemen were found accumulating stock in quantities exceeding those authorised by the chief controller, the excess was to be confiscated.

Ancient Indian farmers had well-developed knowledge of agrarian practices such as crop rotation, inter-cropping, mixed cropping and seasonal sowing. Texts like the 'Vrikshayurveda,' 'Arthashastra' and 'Krishi Parashara' enumerate different methods of improving productivity. Ancient farmers had an in-depth understanding of different soil types, categorising them as urvara (fertile) and usara (sterile), and identified which crops were best suited for specific land types. Kautilya classified soil according to the economic importance of the crops grown and their productivity, as these parameters helped fix the amount of taxation to be imposed. The Yajurveda mentions that before taking a second crop, manuring the field was a must. Organic manures in the form of cow dung, compost and the mud from the bottom of water tanks were commonly used to maintain long-term soil fertility and add nutrients.

Surapala's Vrikshayurveda mentions natural ways of getting rid of plant insects, like watering the infected trees with cold water for seven days. The worms could be controlled by the paste of milk and kunapa (liquid manure), and also by smearing the roots with a mixture of white mustard and medicinal plants like vidanga.

Kautilya devotes an entire section to irrigation, detailing canals, reservoirs, dams (setu), tanks and wells. He prescribes fines for damaging irrigation works and incentives for constructing new ones, recognising water as central to food security. Two types of setu are mentioned in the Arthashastra - hydraulic projects with a natural source of water (sahodak setu) and those which were fed with water brought artificially (ahaaryodak setu). Wells and tanks/ponds were local-level irrigation projects.

There is evidence that the Harappans constructed low-cost water-harvesting devices such as small check dams and bunds using rock-cut pieces and boulders. Mohenjo-daro, a major urban centre, received water from hundreds of wells which helped access water from underground. Canalising flood waters through ditches for irrigating the rabi crops (crops of the dry season) was also practised at that time. The maintenance and upkeep of the Sudarshana Lake through time indicates the huge importance attached by the monarchs to conserving water. Sudarshana Lake was an artificial reservoir in Gujarat, originally built during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya by his governor, Pushyagupta Vaishya, for water conservation and irrigation. From a later period, *Rani-ki-Vav* is an exceptional example of a distinctive form of subterranean water architecture of the Indian subcontinent - the stepwell - which is located on the banks of the Saraswati River in Patan, Gujarat.

Since the beginning of civilisation, storing food has been crucial to ensure survival. That the Harappan civilisation was capable of generating sufficient surplus for its rural and urban population as well is proved by the granaries at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Air ducts were provided to keep grains dry and free from moisture.

The Arthashastra specifies punishments in case standing crops were damaged due to the negligence of certain people. If animals ate crops, the owner of the offending animal was meant to pay double the damage calculated according to the expected harvest to the one who had suffered. If animals strayed and ate grains in stores and threshing floors, the owner of the cattle was to pay a penalty of 48 panas to the state. The farmers were supposed to sell their produce (fruits, vegetables, flowers, etc.) only at the market; otherwise, they were liable to a penalty. The punishment for stealing agricultural produce was 200 panas.

Our ancestors were far ahead of their times in devising strategies and making use of traditional wisdom to ensure high productivity and to be able to feed the non-food-producing populations. Food security is crucial for making India formidable as it forms the foundation for national stability, economic growth, improved public health and human capital development. Ensuring all citizens have access to sufficient food is absolutely imperative for India to achieve its full potential as she marches toward becoming one of the leading nations of the world.

(The writer is the Director, Bharat Ki Soch. He is a retired IPS and has served as Chairman of Haryana Public Service Commission, DG - ITBP, DG - NDRF and Commissioner of Police, Kolkata)

Message for the New Year: Give, Grow, and Rise

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

First, know that you are lucky. Second, know that you are here to do some good. Third, be grateful for all that you have received. When you hold on to these resolutions, fear has no place to stay

WISDOM IS LISTENING TO THIS KNOWLEDGE. WHEN YOU ARE IMMERSED IN WISDOM, THE GRIP OF THE MIND LOOSENS UP WITH WISDOM, YOU CAN TAKE RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT GETTING BURDENED. YOU ACT FULLY, YET REMAIN INWARDLY FREE. THIS IS WHAT KEEPS LIFE LIGHT EVEN WHEN WORK INCREASES

As you enter the New Year, remember that you are here to be a giver, not a taker. You are here to do some good work in the world. A giver is independent; a taker is not. And when you are here to give, your needs anyway get taken care of. In fact, you will get more than what you need.

This thought itself brings a deep sense of relaxation. The world would like to see you as a generous, happy person. That is what you must radiate. You are already radiating this; you just resolve to do more of it. Everyone faces ups and downs in life. Never mind if one such moment steps in. But keep this resolution firm in your mind: 'I am here to do some good. I am here to give something back.'

At the same time, do not get frustrated thinking, "I want to do something good, but I am not able to." That will not help either. This mind is very tricky. It can make you miserable in the best situations. The mind creates its own shell and sits inside it, reeling again and again in misery, and then it feels, 'Everyone else is wrong, and only I am right.'

Giving Brings Inner Freedom

When you shift from taking to giving, something changes inside. Fear leaves you, and you stop getting frustrated. The mind becomes lighter. You realise that life is supporting you, not opposing you. When you open yourself, there is more space for grace to move through you.

Often, people who pray do not take responsibility, and those who take responsibility do not pray. Spirituality brings both together. Seva and spiritual practices go hand in hand. The deeper you go in meditation, the stronger the urge to share. When you do some seva, you gain merit. When you do some work for others, you gain strength for yourself.

The more you give, the more strength is given to you. The more you open yourself, the more room there is for the Divine to fill you. If you have the desire to serve and help others, you do not have to worry. Your life is not a big responsibility for the Divine. It can take care of you very well. Do not be overly concerned about money. Be filled with love. Be filled with gratitude. Fear vanishes when divine love dawns.

Seva: The Antidote to Misery

Seva always brings immense joy. It is the most effective antidote to depression. The day you feel hopeless or miserable, get out and ask someone, "What can I do for you?" The service you do will bring a revolution inside you. It will change your whole inner conversation.

When you keep asking, "Why me?" or "What about me?" you get stuck in life. This lack of expansion throws people into lows and depression.

The way to grow from individual consciousness to universal consciousness is to share others' sorrow and joy. When consciousness grows, you cannot stay depressed.

What does seva mean? Seva is to be like the Divine. God does not expect anything from you. When you do something just for the joy of doing it, that is seva. Seeing love within you is meditation. Seeing the Divine in the person next to you is service. When both come together, life becomes natural and joyful.

"SO BEGIN THIS NEW YEAR BY SERVING AND CELEBRATING - CELEBRATING LIFE, CELEBRATING GIVING, CELEBRATING THE KNOWING THAT YOUR TRUE NATURE IS HAPPINESS"
– GURUDEV

Unlimited Responsibility Requires Wisdom

Meditation has helped you sail through many phases in life. But practice alone is not enough. Wisdom is essential, along with practice. Wisdom is listening to this knowledge. When you are immersed in wisdom, the grip of the mind loosens up. With wisdom, you can take responsibility without getting burdened. You act fully, yet remain inwardly free. This is what keeps life light even when work increases.

Service and Commitment Give Direction to Your Life Energy

Life energy needs a direction to flow in. When it does not have direction, it gets stagnant and brings you confusion. Just as water has to keep flowing, life also has to keep moving. When energy flows in the right direction, clarity comes, enthusiasm comes, and doubts fall away.

Often, we avoid taking on a bigger commitment because it looks inconvenient. But comfort does not come from convenience. That which is convenient gives only an illusion of comfort. What truly gives comfort is standing by what you feel is right. When you drop something because it feels inconvenient, that very convenience later turns into discomfort.

Many people hesitate to take on a larger role, thinking it will take away their freedom. In fact, it is the opposite. When you expand your responsibility, your capacity expands along with it. Smaller roles feel suffocating because you have more potential than what you are using. When you stretch a little beyond what feels easy, hidden talents begin to surface.

Often, we think we should first have the resources and then take responsibility. This is not so. You'd be surprised. When you take responsibility, resources just come to you. When the intention is clear, support flows as and when needed. Do not wait for everything to be perfect before you make a beginning. Perfection comes while walking, not before walking. The way to rise above the small mind is to think, "What can I do for the world?" When everyone comes from the point of contributing, society becomes divine.

As we step into 2026, know this: you are all like doctors. Doctors are most needed when people are not well, or there is a disease to tackle. Similarly, there is a mental health epidemic that the world has been going through post-COVID-19. Just as you have found this priceless wisdom in life that has uplifted your mind and heart, that has brought so much joy in your life, now it is time to share it with others, too. Understand that there is work to be done, and you have the strength to do it.

Act 100 per cent, but do not get entangled. Take responsibility, but stay above the rut. After you have acted, step back. Become a witness to everything. When action and awareness go together, life remains balanced.

Keep Three Things Alive in Your Heart This Year

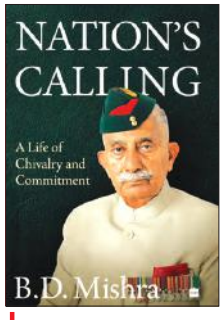
First, know that you are lucky. Second, know that you are here to do some good. Third, be grateful for all that you have received. When you hold on to these resolutions, fear has no place to stay.

There is hope for the world, there is hope for society, because individuals who are centred, generous, and joyful naturally uplift others.

So begin this New Year by serving and celebrating — celebrating life, celebrating giving, celebrating the knowing that your true nature is happiness.

A life framed by conflict and service

ANIL BHAT



Title: Nation's Calling
Author: Brig B. D. Mishra (Retd)
MRP: ₹799/-
Publisher: Harper Collins

Born in Kathauta, a well-known village near Varanasi in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, in 1939, Bal Dutt Mishra was commissioned in December 1961 as a Second Lieutenant in the 18th Battalion of the Madras Regiment (18 Madras), the oldest infantry regiment in the Indian Army.

The first four of twenty-four chapters of the book dwell on scenarios of the author's family, village, district and school days, and memories of colonial days, Partition and thereafter.

Ten months after the author got commissioned — in October 1962 — when the Chinese launched massive, coordinated assaults in Ladakh and NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency), following months of failed diplomacy and border clashes, 18 Madras began preparing for induction into that war by conducting field exercises, but did not get mobilised.

However, a chapter has been devoted to this war and its aftermath, as it exposed significant flaws in the Indian Government's leadership and policies - political myopia, inadequate military preparedness, and diplomatic miscalculation. The Government's flawed "Forward Policy", which placed military outposts in disputed areas on the assumption that China would not use force, proved unsound and helped trigger the conflict. India lacked the military strength, equipment and logistics to sustain such a posture. Further, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Defence Minister VK Krishna Menon meddled with Army leadership, leaving troops — once the best in World Wars I and II — underequipped, without adequate winter clothing or modern weapons, and ultimately facing defeat with high casualties.

The 1962 debacle was followed by a major revamp of the armed forces. Krishna Menon and Army Chief Gen PN Thapar were removed; new raisings of fighting arms units, an increase of officers by way of emergency commissions, and weapons modernisation were approved. At long last, the Army's over six-decades-old .303 Lee Enfield bolt-action rifle got replaced by the 7.62 self-loading rifle.

In April 1965, 18 Madras moved to Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) for the second India-Pakistan war, again waged by Pakistan. The battalion fought various actions in the areas of J&K and Punjab, for which it was awarded battle and theatre honours. Prior to the 1971 India-Pakistan war, fought on two fronts - West Pakistan and erstwhile East Pakistan, which became the newly liberated nation called — the author got posted to the Eastern theatre.

As this review is being written, a great irony is being played out in Bangladesh. In early 1971, the Pakistani Army, dominated by Muslim Punjabis of West Pakistan, began an orgy of killing East Pakistan's thousands of Bengali men and raping millions of Bengali women, till the Indian Army surrounded East Pakistan and liberated it on 16 December 1971. Fifty-four years later, in August 2024, Bangladesh's peace and progress were shattered by the US deep state, changing the regime there and causing problems for India. Since then, with the added involvement of Pakistan, China and Turkiye, Bangladesh has been in a state of arson and anarchy.

It was a year after becoming a Brigadier that the author faced the first of two very challenging assignments. The first was moving his Brigade to Sri Lanka as part of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) for Operation Pawan in 1987. The primary mission was to disarm Tamil militant groups, particularly the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and restore peace under the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The Indian Government's handling of this accord and the deployment of the IPKF mission in Sri Lanka were politically deeply flawed. While the Indian Army performed creditably in adapting to an unforeseen counter-insurgency role, the overall operation is often cited as a failure due to political missteps and a lack of clear objectives. An unexpected and unwelcome development was that the LTTE turned hostile after the initial phase of the operation.

The next very challenging task for the author was in 1993, when, as Commander of the National Security Guard's Counter Hijack Task Force, he led a successful operation to rescue the passengers and crew of the hijacked Indian Airlines Flight 427. For his leadership and bravery during this crisis, he received the Prime Minister's appreciation.

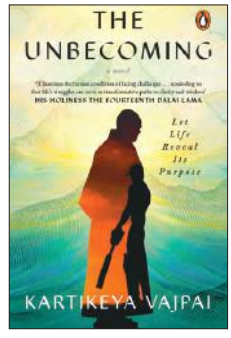
Four years after retiring from service, in 1999, when the Indian Army reacted to the Pakistani Army's intrusion in the Kargil area, Brig Mishra volunteered to join the Army again. While that application was not accepted, the Army Chief's gratitude and appreciation were conveyed to him. In October 2017, the author was appointed as Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, and in October 2022, he was given additional charge as the Governor of Meghalaya. In February 2023, he was appointed as Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh, becoming the second person to hold this position after the region became a Union Territory in 2019. In July 2025, Brig Mishra resigned owing to health reasons.

Reading about the author's time in 18 Madras was good fun for this reviewer, who coincidentally was commissioned into 19 Madras three decades after the author was commissioned, and who also had a very pleasant association with Lt Gen SL Malhotra, prominently mentioned in the book. The accounts and anecdotes covering the author's stages of life before and during his military career, and thereafter his tenures as Governor/Lieutenant Governor, make the book interesting, informative, and one which can be enjoyed by both servicemen and civilians.

(The author is VSM (Retd), a strategic affairs analyst and former spokesperson, Defence Ministry and Indian Army)

The Unbecoming: Learning the art of letting go

GYANESHWAR DAYAL



Title: The Unbecoming
Author: Kartikeya Vajpai
MRP: ₹399
Publisher: Penguin eBury Press

Debut novelist Kartikeya Vajpai unveiled his book, *The Unbecoming*, at an event organised by the Prabha Khaitan Foundation under its book-launch initiative, Kitaab. The event, held in New Delhi, brought together an eminent gathering of thinkers, writers, scholars, and readers, creating an atmosphere of quiet contemplation that resonated deeply with the spirit of the novel. The launch was graced by the august presence of Padma awardee Dr Karan Singh, former Union Minister Dr Murli Manohar Joshi, and Geshe Dorji Damdul, Director of Tibet House. Former Vice-President of India, Jagdeep Dhankhar, was also among the distinguished attendees.

The Unbecoming arrives with forewords by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Swami Sarvapriyananda — an endorsement that underscores the book's philosophical depth and spiritual inquiry. At its core, the novel is a contemplative exploration of identity, ego, and inner freedom, woven through a deeply human narrative.

Speaking at the launch, Kartikeya Vajpai reflected on the central premise of his work. "The Unbecoming is rooted in the understanding that much of our suffering comes from clinging to identities shaped by fear and expectation," he said.

Dr Karan Singh, reflecting on the novel, drew attention to its resonance with India's long philosophical tradition. "People often ask whether it is possible to combine public life with spiritual life," he observed. "It is indeed possible, provided one has a deep commitment to both the inner self and one's outward responsibilities. Kartikeya has brought these dimensions together with remarkable sensitivity."

The narrative centres on Siddharth Kapoor, once celebrated as the golden face of Indian cricket. After a meteoric rise, Siddharth's world collapses under the weight of repeated defeats, exposing the fragility of his confidence and the hollowness of the identity he has carefully constructed. Stripped of public adulation, his only path forward leads him back to Ajay Goswami — the legendary coach he once abandoned in anger — now living a life of austere seclusion in McLeod Ganj. What follows is not a conventional story of redemption but a quiet reckoning. Siddharth must confront his ego, mend a broken guru-shishya bond, and accept an unsettling truth: genuine renewal demands the surrender of the very self that once brought him fame.

Rather than relying on dramatic twists, *The Unbecoming* unfolds inwardly. Its power lies in emotional nuance, psychological tension, and the slow erosion of certainties we often mistake for identity. Vajpai's characters are not idealised; they are conflicted, vulnerable, and profoundly human. Growth in this novel is nonlinear, marked by doubt, loss, and silence rather than triumph. The title itself is emblematic — not of failure, but of necessary undoing: the painful yet liberating process of becoming less of what the world demands and closer to what the self truly requires.

Ultimately, The Unbecoming does not tell readers who to become; instead, it asks what they must first let go of. Introspective, restrained, and quietly unsettling, the novel will resonate deeply with readers drawn to psychological fiction and philosophical inquiry. The book leaves readers with a question: what must we release before we can truly live? The journey at its heart is not about reclaiming lost fame, but discovering the hollowness beneath it. In learning to unlearn, the protagonist discovers a freedom no victory ever offered. As mentor and student meet again in humility rather than ambition, the story reminds us that renewal comes not from adding more to life, but from shedding what no longer serves us. In its stillness, the novel invites us to pause, reflect, and recognise the subtle art of becoming by unbecoming.

(The writer is a Senior Editor with *The Pioneer*)

Art is a lot of Work

Behind every painting that changes hands lies invisible labour that manages logistics, conservation and legal care

Kanika Saxena

All life is paperwork. Why would art be any different?

The creator might put soul into a piece of art, but for it to have credence as a piece of value, paperwork has to be filled.

Hidden behind each work of art is a network that cranks up to legitimise it, transport it, preserve it and safeguard it. The moment a collector buys a work of art, a silent machinery begins to move. Crates are measured, humidity settings calibrated, paperwork drafted, couriers briefed. A painting that once hung undisturbed on a gallery wall now enters the new, more fragile phase of its life.

Art may begin with imagination, but it survives on systems. Behind every painting that changes hands lies a quiet infrastructure of paperwork, logistics, conservation and legal care that determines whether a work can travel, be sold, or endure. As India's art market grows and collecting becomes more widespread, this invisible labour is emerging as one of the most critical forces shaping art ownership.

India's art market is growing steadily with a surge of first-time collectors. Its art auction market touched $144 million (₹1,253 crore) in 2023, according to the "State of the Indian Art Market Report FY23" by Grant Thornton Bharat and Indian Art Investor.

As more buyers treat art as wealth, memory and legacy, they are discovering that possessing a work is only half the battle. Owning it is a commitment beyond what is seen.

What emerges from conversations with galleries, auction houses, logistics firms, collectors, craft platforms and art lawyers is a simple truth: the art world runs on invisible labour.

PAPERWORK OF PROVENANCE

Before an artwork moves outside a gallery or an auction house, it must have paperwork that assures that it has a well-documented past.

"Documentation should begin even before money changes hands," says Safir Anand, senior partner & head of trademarks at Noida-based IP law firm Anand & Anand, who works with private collectors, galleries and estates. A collector, he explains, must secure three essentials: a certificate of authenticity, a detailed invoice and a clean provenance chain. Anything less, and future transferability becomes uncertain.

Auction houses echo the same caution. "There is no one-size-fits-all timeline," says Punya Nagpal, senior vice-president of Saffronart, where every work undergoes three broad layers of verification—authenticity, condition and legal ownership. "Complex provenance or a long publishing trail naturally takes longer, and if verification risks missing our deadlines, we defer the work to a future sale," she adds.

A serious collection is a living ecosystem. It demands constant attention like ideal temperature, humidity, condition checks, and professional restoration when required"

SHALINI PASSI, art patron and collector

It is even more exacting at the auction house Sotheby's, which routinely moves works across continents. "Every consignment begins with due diligence," says Manjari Sihare-Sutin, co-worldwide head, modern & contemporary South Asian art at Sotheby's. Provenance records, exhibition history, literature citations and condition are independently reviewed by specialists and conservation teams. External scholars are looped in when necessary, creating a triangulated review system.

Gaps in provenance appear more frequently within India than outside. "Works held abroad often have institutional documentation. Indian-held works tend to rely on personal letters or informal archives," says Sihare-Sutin. The challenge, then, is not just paperwork but "credibility and context".

Things are changing. Galleries, too, are standardising their systems.

Eikowa, an art gallery with presence in Hyderabad and Gurgaon, has started issuing blockchain certificates for every sale, a tamper-proof digital record of authenticity and transaction history. "It helps create traceability in an ecosystem that still lacks a unified provenance standard," says its founder Vaishnavi Murali.

Works with partial or informal documentation undergo far deeper scrutiny, often requiring external scholars. This is why for those looking to re-sell their art collection, the secondary market has created opportunity but has also exposed vulnerabilities.

Auction houses emphasise that the burden of proof lies with the seller.

That is why for works sold privately—to another collector, through a gallery, or via advisors—a professional appraiser becomes indispensable.

Such valuation is not merely about a number. It sets expectations, informs insurance and determines whether the work should be restored, conserved, or left untouched before sale.

A Collector's Private Art Registry Includes:

- Certificate of authenticity (with dimensions, image, signature, medium)
- Invoice with full buyer-seller details
- Provenance chain
- Insurance and valuation certificates
- Customs papers for imports
- Payment proof and sale agreement (for high-value pieces)

Source: Industry

IN TRANSIT

Once the paperwork is cleared, the artwork enters its most physically vulnerable stage—transportation. Moving teacups is easy. Moving a canvas worth crores in monsoon humidity is not.

Galleries like Bruno Art Gallery treat this phase as a high-risk operation. "Every piece undergoes a thorough condition check, with photographs and a signed report before it leaves us," says Akshitta Aggarwal, gallery director at Bruno Art Group. Art works are then packed using acid-free tissue, custom crates and climate-stable cushioning, and transported only with trained logistics professionals.

Cratingo, a Delhi-based art handling company, breaks down the movement more technically: Prep begins with condition documentation, followed by selecting the packing method —soft-packing, crating, or climate-controlled casing—and route planning.

High-value works often require "redundant climate systems and live thermal monitoring" especially during interstate movement. Once at the destination, the team conducts mounting checks, environmental assessments and post-installation condition reports.

The challenges are rarely predictable. In one instance, a sudden heat spike during a long transfer forced Cratingo to recalibrate climate controls mid-route and wrap the crate in emergency insulation. The incident, the team says, reinforced why every movement must be backed by contingency systems.

"Moving a heritage artwork isn't logistics, it is conservation in motion," says Aakanksha Singh, founder, Bridge Bharat, a platform that co-creates contemporary works with India's last-generation master artists. "We once transported a 12-ft-long natural-dye textile during peak humidity. We built a humidity-absorbing archival crate, rolled the textile in museum-safe materials, monitored climate in real time and had a conservator inspect it on arrival. The craft is delicate, so the systems around it must be incredibly strong."

Airports, perhaps the most high-risk spaces for exquisite craft, follow their own protocols. "Transporting art is not a shipment, it is a responsibility," says Naresh Sharma, CEO of IRHPL Group, a travel retail organisation. Its Delhi-based store Artport sells art, craft and souvenirs. Fragile pieces like Kangra miniatures or marble dust idols are often hand-carried by trained staff rather than shipped. Each piece carries its own documentation packet containing authenticity certificates, provenance, condition reports and a cultural story card.

All this has grown quietly alongside India's art market boom. According to industry estimates, specialised art logistics in India has grown 3.5 times in the last decade, driven by rising private collections, gallery expansions and international consignments.

HOMECOMING

If transport tests an artwork's physical resilience, installation tests the collector's commitment. Installation is where ownership becomes personal.

Delhi's Tarun Art Gallery stresses the role of the wall itself. "Plain walls are preferred so that textures don't conflict with the artwork, and diffused warm lighting is best," says Tarun Sharma, director, Tarun Art Gallery. Humidity remains the silent enemy, capable of causing mould, fungus and colour shifts if left unchecked.

Collectors today are more willing to rotate displays, rethink arrangements and treat their homes as evolving curated spaces. Aggarwal says, "The idea of keeping a work forever in one corner is losing appeal."

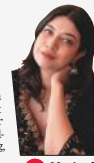
Plain walls are preferred so that textures don't conflict with the artwork, and diffused warm lighting is best"

TARUN SHARMA, director, Tarun Art Gallery, Delhi

Art patron and collector Shalini Passi captures this shift: "Not every work needs to be on view all the time. I rotate pieces depending on mood, light, even the season."

"A serious collection is a living ecosystem," says Passi, who has spent decades building a private collection. "It demands constant attention like ideal temperature, humidity, condition checks and professional restoration when required."

Installation of sculptures demands an entirely different kind of structural, spatial and sometimes architectural outlook.



A Subodh Gupta sculpture had to be lifted over the boundary wall with a crane because it could not pass through Passi's gate. The base area of her garden was reinforced with concrete to hold the installation, followed by regular DuPont coating to preserve the material—an example of how sculptures don't just sit in a space but reshape it.

Most collectors see a heritage piece as decor, but they underestimate what begins after the sale. Most damage happens quietly in the first year, long before anyone notices. Ownership isn't display, it is stewardship"

AAKANKSHA SINGH, founder, Bridge Bharat

Passi's reference to "ecosystem" isn't a metaphor. Art handlers say an Indian home is loaded with risks most collectors don't notice —like hanging a painting near an AC vent, exposing a paper work to harsh lighting, or placing a sculpture in a high-traffic corridor. Cratingo lists the big three: direct sunlight, humidity and heat-emitting fixtures.

Aggarwal observes that first-time buyers are often shocked by how simple choices like wall colour, light temperature, even furniture proximity can transform an artwork's character.

"Most collectors see a heritage piece as decor, but they underestimate what begins after the sale: natural dyes fade, wood breathes, metals oxidise, textiles need rotation. Most damage happens quietly in the first year, long before anyone notices. Ownership isn't display, it is stewardship," says Singh of Bridge Bharat.

Different mediums age differently. Sharma of Tarun Art Gallery says acrylic works can be lightly cleaned with damp cloth, but oils must not be touched with moisture. Older oils may require professional varnishing or surface cleaning by restoration experts.

Artport rotates textiles to prevent light exposure and conducts routine condition checks because natural materials respond differently to regional climates. Wood from humid South India may crack in a dry northern terminal; pashmina weaves need humidity-stable vitrines.

Across the market, conservators increasingly play the role of first responders. At Saffronart, even before a work is listed, conservators assess the piece and suggest whether it needs stabilisation or touch-ups. Any intervention, Nagpal stresses, is "preventive, not aesthetic—to preserve a work's stability and intent, never to alter its appearance".

LEGAL LEGACY

If collection and maintenance are the physical backbone of ownership, paperwork is the legal spine. In India, that spine is often fragile.

Most disputes arise because buyers hold "framed beauties" but lack paperwork. Several art works, Anand notes, are "lost in estates" simply because heirs cannot identify their true value or origin. A structured private art registry with a listing of condition reports, valuations, provenance and transaction records is the only way to ensure clarity.

Then there is the Indian tax law, under which art is treated not as decor but as a capital asset akin to jewellery or antiques. Collectors should know that:

- Long-term capital gains apply on sale.
- There is no inheritance tax, but heirs incur tax when they sell art.
- Gift tax applies if art above a threshold value is gifted to a non-relative.
- Import duties and GST apply on artwork being brought into the country

Next up, a clean transfer in a will must list each artwork individually with medium, title, dimensions and intended heir. Probate formalises the transfer and heirs must subsequently execute an acknowledgment deed and update insurance and storage records.

In Indian families, where multiple homes, multiple owners and multiple memories intersect, this chain of clarity is essential.

For a growing art market like India, the future of collecting art may not be defined by what people buy, but by how well they care for it.

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Green is the Colour of Loss

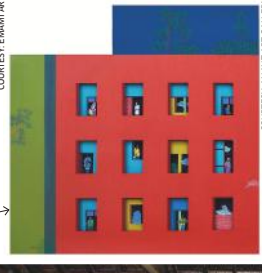
How artists are looking closely at climate anxiety and environmental grief—from Shajith's 50-ft-long painting 'Wiping Out' to Chinky Shukla's Pokhran photographs

Chintan Girish Modi

Across India's major art platforms, a stubborn question has been asserting itself repeatedly: What does it mean to make art in the midst of an ecological crisis? When statistics seem impersonal, and advocacy sounds alarmist, artists step in, offering ways to process what is going on.

RB Shajith's 50-ft-long painting, which is part of his series *Wiping Out*, is on display at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in Kerala, which will be on till March 31. Using oil, acrylic and watercolour on wooden boards and canvas, it is built from his recollections of growing up in the Malabar region. It reframes the forest not as a resource to be exploited but an ecosystem to be revered. His art invites the viewer to get lost in the wilderness. With green spaces disappearing rapidly, his work is a plea to pause and prevent further damage in the name of development. It allows the viewer to mourn in solidarity with nature. The scale of the work might look exaggerated at first but it reflects the scale of loss that it bears witness to.

Construction over Waterbodies by Debnath



COURTESY: EMAMI ART

Khatua's *Stories Growing Through Windows*

COURTESY: AN ART GALLERY

Stanley's Flowers from a Dream

ECO CRISIS

A similar approach was evident in Santanu Debnath's exhibition "Morphology of Water" at the Emami Art gallery. After completing his art education in Kolkata, when he returned to live at his village, Betpukur, about 100 km away, he was saddened by the declining role of ponds and reservoirs in structuring communal life. His *Construction over Waterbodies*, an acrylic painting on canvas, is a visual elegy bemoaning the distance that has crept into the relationship between humans and nature.

With American psychologist Thomas Doherty emphasising the impact of ecological crisis on mental health, it is critical to understand how artists are developing their practice in the face of climate anxiety and environmental grief arising from the destruction of livelihoods, homes and landscapes.

***Construction over Waterbodies*, an acrylic painting on canvas, is a visual elegy bemoaning the distance that has crept into the relationship between humans and nature**

The harm caused to land, water and air eventually affects humans. At the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa in December, Delhi-based photographer Chinky Shukla's project "When Buddha Stopped Smiling" documented the human and environmental costs of the 1974 and 1998 nuclear tests in Pokhran. She went there in 2015 to understand the impact of nuclear radiation. Her photographs of people living close to the India-Pakistan border draw attention to how narratives of scientific progress and national security can endanger human life.

Tremors from the tests conducted in 1998 "made deep cracks in their mud huts, burst the village water tanks, contaminated ponds and farmland". She met people facing severe health issues, including cancer patients, women who had miscarriages and parents of children with cerebral palsy and cognitive disorders. Her work was exhibited as part of the Serendipity x Arles Grant supported by the French Institute in India. She says, "Nearly 20 years after the Smiling Buddha mission, the villages near Pokhran have joined a tragic global circle of residents of nuclear test sites that grapple every day with the aftermath of radiation. The test got India the world's ear, but the residents of these villages are still waiting to be heard."

PHOTO: AJJOJI ALPHONSE

Shajith with his painting *Wiping Out* at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale

HOPE SPROUTS

This grim reality was countered with a hopeful vision at Art Mumbai, an art fair held at the Mahalaxmi Racecourse in November. Vadodara-based Tito Stanley SJ's paintings *Flowers from A Dream* and *Midnight Love* seemed to depict nature in a magnificent, almost prayerful way, with the human figure reduced to a speck in them, inviting viewers to adopt a stance of awe and humility while considering their place in the vast cosmos they are part of.

Meanwhile, Delhi-based Digbijayee Khatua's paintings *Moments between the Walls* and *Stories Growing Through Windows* at the same fair, put the spotlight on feats of human architecture, revealing how barren everything looks when homes are made of just cement and concrete until the plant and animal kingdom declare their presence with monkeys trying to sneak into homes and plants trying to grow out of crevices. This is irony at its finest, making viewers reflect on how humans might be seen as intruders from the perspective of other species.

As Mukul Sharma, professor of environmental studies at Ashoka University, has pointed out, Indian environmental discourse tends to obfuscate the centrality of caste in determining how waste is handled and who handles it. Thankfully, Delhi-based artist Niroj Satpathy's installations at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale go straight to the heart of the matter due to his five-year stint as a night supervisor at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's Solid Waste Management Department. Using discarded objects found in garbage dumps and landfills to create installations, collages and archives, he challenges ideas of what is valuable and what needs to be thrown away. Apart from holding up a mirror to consumption and excess, he also shows a way out of despair, celebrating human creativity.

The writer is a Mumbai-based art critic

Sleight of Pod

As podcasts explode, paid interviews are masquerading as organic content. Shouldn't there be disclosures?

Apoorva Mittal

Podcast" was the word of the year back in 2005, just about a year after it was coined by Ben Hammersley, a British technologist and journalist, who combined "iPod" and "broadcast" to capture the boom in online radio, thanks to the popularity of Apple's seminal gadget, the availability of cheap audio software and rise of blogging.

That boom continued over the next 20-odd years, making podcasts immensely popular tools of cultural, social and political heft. From *Serial*, which captures true crime narratives, to *99% Invisible*, which goes into details of design, to *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which routinely tops charts worldwide, podcasts have become an influential medium attracting both mass and niche audiences in a rather short span of time.

In India, the podcast revolution curve lagged the West, but it has certainly become mainstream in these last few years, with the likes of Ranveer Allahbadia and Raj Shamani finding audiences across the country and from across age groups. According to PwC, there were 177 million monthly podcast listeners in India in 2024, up from 154 million in 2023. This number is projected to reach 267 million by 2029.

With such a sharp growth in listenership comes advertiser interest. That is normal, but when paid interviews masquerade as organic content, things become problematic. **ET**'s reporting shows that on some of India's most watched podcasts you can pay to be interviewed. For a fee ranging from roughly ₹15 lakh to ₹30 lakh, individuals seeking visibility can buy their way onto these shows, bundled with a slate of deliverables: Instagram reels, a YouTube episode, and 5- to 10-minute cutdowns from the main podcast pushed across the hosts' social channels.

People who are shelling out the bucks include brand founders, IPO-bound entrepreneurs and individuals seeking visibility or positioning, say media agency executives who shared these rates.

Now the big issue: such paid appearances are rarely disclosed to audiences. Sponsored episodes are woven into largely organic programming—alongside guests invited by the host—making it difficult for viewers to distinguish paid content from unpaid conversations. This takes on added significance as consumers increasingly turn to independent creators for news and information without guardrails that exist in the broader media ecosystem.

TRANSPARENCY ISSUE

Tech giants like YouTube which amplify podcasts and help them reach their audiences are clear about one thing—disclosure. "Creators are required to disclose if their content includes paid promotion of any kind.... If content is found to violate these policies, we take appropriate action, which can include removing content," according to YouTube.

Raj Shamani, whose podcast *Figuring Out* became India's No. 1 podcast in 2025, says their primary source of revenue is brand deals, sponsorships and IPs, and that paid podcasts are less than 20% of the total programming. "Paid guests are primarily CEOs of large companies and MNCs who want to spread expertise and get closer to their end users," he says.

He adds that they have a list of checks — such as verifying background, qualifications and work—before taking on a paid guest. Shamani says they retain 100% editorial control and never share the questions upfront: "We don't give edit control regardless of paid or unpaid podcasts."

Headds, "If you don't cross our checks then you can't be on show no matter how much you are willing to pay. There are so many guests who have been on multiple podcasts all around the country but because they don't clear our guidelines we have said no."

When asked about lack of disclosures about paid appearances and the amount charged from guests, Shamani says he does not have it and clarity on that his business team looks at it. "I look at yearly revenues — whatever is left after the expenses comes to me. I just focus on research for podcasts, the rest is run by the team." He has a team of 70 people and a chief business officer.

A podcaster says, "The real cash cow in India is the PR that people attempt to get done by being on podcasts. The money from paid podcasting is just so good, and the higher up you go, the better it gets—it's very hard to refuse."

A key issue is that the platforms, which thrive by driving traffic to these podcasts, are supposed to be policing them, to ensure they stick to the rules they themselves drew up. A classic case of conflict of interest.

It isn't clear how many instances of the platforms policing big podcasters for paid marketing has happened in India. Spotify did not comment on a query about their disclosure policies and tracking mechanism in case of violation.

> "I have stopped doing paid guests. Excessive commercialisation of podcasts in India, especially paid podcasting and getting viral guests, is making all podcasts look and feel the same"
> **Vinamre Kasanaa,** host, *Dostcast*

> Paid guests are primarily CEOs of large companies and MNCs who want to spread expertise and get closer to their end users"
> **Raj Shamani,** host, *Figuring Out*

What complicates matters is that beyond the platforms, there aren't enough industry bodies—or even broad common standards—governing such paid marketing. Take the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). Manisha Kapoor, CEO of ASCI, says, "Paid podcasts by individuals are a form of paid PR, which does not come under ASCI's remit."

She adds, "However, when a podcast promotes a brand, then it can be considered an ad, which needs a disclosure. The principle of editorial versus paid content is well established in many places such as the Norms of Journalistic Conduct in the Press Council of India rules. In certain cases—such as social media handles of news platforms—we have issued guidelines that require disclosures for promoted content."

Podcasters say they are being put under the scanner. "Paid podcasts are being scrutinised more harshly because they're seen as 'alternative media', but similar PR has existed in business media for years," says a podcaster.

Under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, without disclosure, paid podcasts could amount to a violation, according to a media lawyer. Salman Waris, partner, TechLegis Advocates & Solicitors, says that under the Guidelines for Prevention of Misleading Advertisements and Endorsements for Misleading Advertisements, 2022, there is only a thin line between an influencer and an endorser in certain formats. These guidelines, he says, could cover podcasts as well. At the same time, he says all podcast interviews cannot be classified as ads since they feature a mix of paid and unpaid guests. The distinction will depend on whether the content is intended to promote a product or to inform or entertain. Key factors include editorial independence, monetisation transparency and purpose of the content.

PRICE OF CONVERSATIONS

Ayush Shukla, founder of Finnet Media, says it's hard to determine how many appearances in top podcasts are paid, but it could be a few every month. "Pricing depends on views, brand value, and positioning. A Gen Z-focused podcast, for example, may not attract many founders, while founders and businesses are typically the ones willing to pay the most," says Shukla.

For some, it is a case of who will bell the cat. A podcaster says, "Did I disclose paid content? No. At the time I found no problem with it because I saw everyone else doing it." This podcaster reveals that the money that was paid "ranged between ₹10 lakh and ₹20 lakh per episode, usually once a month, sometimes twice".

DIFFERENT PATH

Some are swimming against the tide. Vinamre Kasanaa, host of *Dostcast*, says he is moving away from the paid-conversation model. "As of today, it's been about a month and a half since I stopped doing paid guests," says Kasanaa.

His reason: "Excessive commercialisation of podcasts in India, especially paid podcasting and getting viral guests without any interest in their stories, is making all podcasts look and feel the same." Kasanaa is re-wiring his podcast to prevent that from happening. His plan: to "scale it down and make it self-sustaining, have a few sponsors on board and largely make it curiosity-based again". On the question of lack of disclosures, Kasanaa says audiences need to understand that podcasts take money to run, which is causing the rise in paid podcasts.

The broken monetisation model may be at the heart of the problem. Shukla says, "Most people (who create podcasts) don't make money. The few who do get it from paid guests." That means they end up chasing short-term gains from paid appearances.

To create long-term value, that may not be the path. A podcaster says, "Podcasting is a high-trust, long-tail game. You can't treat it like a gold rush with an exit."

What is clear is that this can be solved only by podcasters, tech companies and independent platforms like ASCI coming together to put the credibility of this powerful medium front and centre. Is a move to make that happen underway? Not yet, and that should be the subject of a podcast or two.

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RULES ON PAID CONTENT

ADVERTISING STANDARDS COUNCIL OF INDIA:
"In certain cases—like social media handles of news platforms—we have issued guidelines that require disclosures for promoted content. Podcasts that are personal in nature but are paid for can be considered a pure form of PR, which does not fall under ASCI's remit. If a podcast promotes a brand, then it can be considered an ad, which needs a disclosure"
Manisha Kapoor, Chairperson, ASCI

YOUTUBE:
"If your content has a paid product placement, endorsement, or other commercial relationship, you need to tell YouTube so that we can facilitate disclosures to users. If we find a video or channel that violates our policies about paid promotional content, we take appropriate action"
YouTube Help Centre

Podcast in India: Rising Listeners, Nascent Revenue

Monthly Podcast Listeners	
2024	177 mn
2029 (P)	267 mn
CAGR (2024-29)	8.5%

Ad Revenue	
2024	$39+ mn
2029 (P)	$57+ mn
CAGR (2024-29):	8%

Source: Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2025-29 India Perspective by PwC

Off With the Shoes

A no-shoe house presents a dilemma for hosts and guests. But it can be managed, one step at a time

Nupur Amarnath

It was at a house Christmas party on a cold December evening in Delhi that a colleague found herself quoting Carrie Bradshaw's emphatic (even petulant) line—"It's an ensemble!"—when she was asked to leave her shoes at the doorstep. Die-hard *Sex and the City* fans would remember the episode where Carrie had to take off—and promptly lose—her $485 shoe at her friend Kyra's baby shower after they became neo-converts to a no-shoe home. While the idea that a columnist could afford multiple Manolo Blahniks hasn't aged well, the no-shoe premise has.

In southern and eastern India, a lot of houses were already Team Kyra, but many are crossing over in the North too. As the outside-shoes-vs-inside-shoes debate spills into living rooms, the humble doormat becomes the fault line. Is it a shoe-in or out? Many, like my colleague, resist and fight for their right to shoes. She says: "In Indian cities like Delhi where you get the poor to do cheap labour to mop homes daily, the no-shoes-inside rule is supercilious, especially when notions of purity and pollution have casteist overtones."

Bengaluru-based communications professional Smriti Lamech is less vociferous but is not entirely pro no-outside-shoe houses. Her reasons are straightforward: first, she's uncomfortable being barefoot in someone else's home. Second, it spoils the look when shoes are factored into dressing up—Carrie was right, after all. Third, the process is awkward, with no stool or chair at entrances. Many comply with house rules, but many actively avoid such situations.

SHOE AWAY

The no-outside-shoe home is not a novelty. Mumbai-based image and etiquette consultant Konkana Bakshi says that in India, many Hindu households have been shoe-free zones—either because of the home temple or because they consider the home a sacred space. "It started as tradition, but post-Covid many follow it for hygiene too."

In East African countries there are dedicated bathroom slippers. In Scandinavia, felt and wool indoor slippers are in vogue, while in Canada, houses have a wet room to take off waterproof gear before coming in. But no one takes inside-outside footwear as seriously as the Japanese. In Japan, indoor shoes called uwabaki are worn in schools and some companies. You can even be fined for wearing outside shoes in rental properties. House slippers are a boundary between indoors and the chaotic outside world, taking physical form in the genkan—a space to remove shoes.

Of late, social media with TikTokers and tweeters have turned etiquette into ideology. For many, removing outside shoes is an act of self-care. Dr Mohemed Sanowfer, consultant, department of internal medicine, KIMSHEALTH, Thiruvananthapuram, says, "Leaving outside shoes at the door is simply a way of keeping our living spaces a little cleaner, especially for children. It's also a mindful habit that reduces what we carry from the street into spaces meant for rest and family."

For instance, Hyderabad-based corporate manager Vandana Wadhawan keeps a cabinet outside the home where any pair of shoes that has gone travelling goes in. Guests are encouraged to do the same. "Why bring them into your home where we sit on floor or walk barefoot?"

DOES THE SHOE FIT?

Delhi-based image and etiquette consultant Sunaiinaa A Hak says post Covid, there have been concerns over hygiene. She herself went no-shoe for two and a half years for the sake of her toddler. But it was not simple. As a host, she made sure they stocked on cute sliders (easier to wear) in various sizes with a stool at the entrance. The slippers were replaced with warmer house shoes in winter. "Etiquette is a two-way street. You may have decided on a no-shoe house but if you are not providing replacements to your guests it doesn't work. You can't impose without any effort." If you are really strict, you can even get shoe covers.

Concerns over outside shoe coming in are exacerbated, thanks to studies showing that shoes carry a host of bacteria indoors. A University of Arizona study found that 96% of shoes tested positive for coliform bacteria, commonly found in faecal matter. Dr Vivek Nangia, chief of pulmonology cluster-1, Max Healthcare, New Delhi, says studies have found that outside shoes can carry Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) that can cause skin, soft tissue and bloodstream infections, E.coli, and Clostridium difficile that can cause diarrhoea and colitis. "These studies have been done in the Western world, where there is not as much dust, grime and human and animal waste as in India. I'm sure there's a greater potential of our shoes carrying more bugs," he says.

Mumbai-based reflexologist Rachel Wawn Kurien gives another reason for going barefoot at home—for overall wellbeing. Kurien, who is British, turned her home into a no-outside-shoe zone during Covid. "I generally recommend some barefoot time to my clients, though ideally on earth or grass. It is helpful for calming and activating our para-sympathetic nervous system," she says. "The idea of grounding is important for us energetically." While Kurien is unsure if going barefoot indoors has any physical or "energetic" benefit, she says anecdotally she has seen those who go barefoot have a deeper connection with ground.

BUCKLE UP

Hak says opting to be a no-outside-shoe home is easier said than done. It's not a diktat, but a dialogue. She says, "Even small changes demand thought. You have to think of how to suggest this approach to people who are coming over." Should you call, text or tell them at the door? Lamech's pet peeve is when it's announced at the last minute. "If people could announce upfront, it makes it simpler for me to dress. Because then I know that my saris or pants are going to go down by three inches. And I won't bother to wear great shoes."

However, the pushback is real even after you announce, says Ahmedabad-based sari stylist Ashwini Narayan who runs a no-shoe house: "It's a real challenge to implement for a house party. Usually, my dinner invite includes a bottom line that says we are a no-shoe house. In spite of that, sometimes people refuse to remove shoes." She asks, "When did Indian homes become a shoe-filled zone?"

A Gurgaon-based architect says that she has had a no-outside-shoe house for 20 years now and no one has ever reacted negatively—at least openly. Hak says, "Hosts have to underline it if they are strict about it at parties too." It helps not only in choosing the right footwear but also in ensuring that you are not in want of a pedicure. Bakshi says people do forego these rules when they are inviting more than 10 people. "If you are liberal enough to host a dinner for 20+ people, you can be liberal enough to allow them in with their shoes," she says. However, Bakshi says, if you see a shoe rack outside a house, as a guest, you should offer to free those tootsies yourself.

Hak has now relaxed her policy as she has created no-shoe zones at home. Lamech is still on the fence: "The only reason a home should have no shoes is if you eat off the floor or have a crawling toddler. In India, everybody has house help coming and sweeping and swabbing at least your main quarters every single day. We are obsessive about it. So why can't you have people come over and settle down comfortably and leave?" All this while keeping their shoes on!

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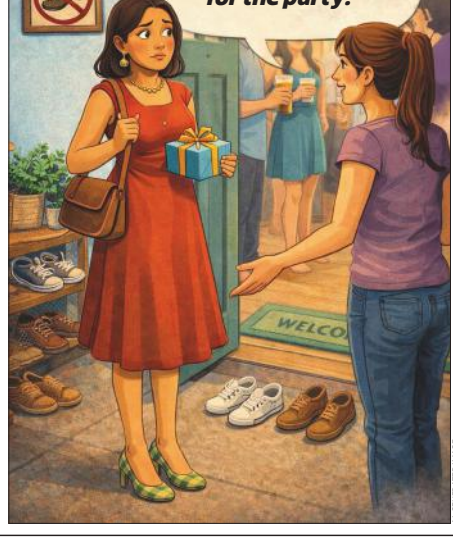

AI-GENERATED IMAGE

> Studies on how outside shoes carry bacteria have been done in the Western world where there's not as much dust, grime and human and animal excreta as in our streets. Our outside shoes probably carry more bugs"
> **Dr VIVEK NANGIA,** head, pulmonology, Max Healthcare, Delhi

> As a guest, if you see a shoe rack outside, offer to leave your shoes out. But for a party of 20+, the rule can be foregone"
> **KONKANA BAKSHI,** image & etiquette consultant

> Etiquette is a two-way street. You can't have a no-shoe house without making arrangements for the guests by way of stocking up on comfortable clean slippers. Or informing them that you are a no-shoe house before they visit"
> **SUNAIINAA A HAK,** etiquette coach and image expert

Opinion

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.

Marie Curie

EDITORIAL

Socialist voice from citadel of Capitalism

The New Year has heralded a defining moment for New York, as the citadel of America's celebrated capitalism has been stormed by a socialist of South Asian descent. Zohran Mamdani, who has taken over as Mayor, has vowed to implement audacious plans to govern the city with a focus on the welfare of the working class. The historic significance of the occasion was not lost on observers; it marked several firsts for America's largest city of eight million residents. The 34-year-old Mamdani is the first Muslim of South Asian origin to be elected to the top post, the first to use a Quran to take oath and the youngest mayor in over a century. The inauguration ceremony in Manhattan captured the generational, political, ethnic and religious magnitude of Mamdani's ascent. He was unapologetic about his democratic socialist credentials. In his public speech after the swearing-in ceremony, he underscored the city's diversity, vowed to protect the underprivileged and reiterated his pledge to attempt to tax the wealthy and corporations to fund his proposals, which include universal childcare and free buses. He placed himself in a lineage of New York mayors who focused their tenures on uplifting the city's most vulnerable. Many New Yorkers — some with hope, some with trepidation — expect Mamdani to be a disruptive political force as reflected by his address that promoted core campaign promises of universal childcare, affordable rents and free bus service. Now the countdown begins as he sets out to fulfil his lofty promises to deliver an agenda of safety, affordability and abundance — where the government "looks and lives like the people it represents".

The occasion also sent out a message to Democratic Party leaders struggling to regain footing at the national level: The excitement surrounding Mamdani's ascendence may suggest a path forward. Significantly, Mamdani declared that he would govern the way he campaigned — as a democratic socialist — and said that meant he would focus on working-class New Yorkers, regardless of criticism from naysayers. The highlight of the spectacular inauguration was the presence of Senator Bernie Sanders, a democratic socialist at the vanguard of the Democratic Party's liberal wing. Sanders, whom Mamdani calls his inspiration, defended the new Mayor's agenda, saying affordable housing is not a radical policy but is the right and decent thing to do. Apart from highlighting his core campaign issues, Mamdani mentioned a few ideas that could have broader appeal beyond his traditional support base, including reforms in the property tax system, an issue that has frustrated New Yorkers across the ideological spectrum. Mamdani's elevation is a testament to the vibrancy of American democracy, in which a seven-year-old immigrant from an African nation can come to the city to realise his dream of becoming its mayor at 34. In the process, he demolishes ethnic stereotypes, overcomes entrenched bureaucracy and ideological status quoism of his own party.

US strikes on Venezuela strategic rather than anything else

The pre-dawn airstrikes by US in Venezuelan capital Caracas on Saturday seem part of a wider strategy and were expected if not anticipated.

Multiple explosions rocked the capital of Venezuela, the South American country having the largest oil reserves in the world, early Saturday. Smoke was seen billowing out near the military zone of Fort Tiuna. Low flying US aircraft created a sonic boom causing panic among people. South Caracas had a total blackout.

Unconfirmed reports say US had "captured' Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. The Guardian, BBC, Al Jazeera, quoting the US President, said Maduro had been captured along with his wife and flown out of the country. Venezuela has not confirmed so far.

US confirmed that President Donald Trump had ordered strikes on sites inside Venezuela, including military facilities. The Venezuelan government denounced these as "very serious military aggression." The Venezuelan President declared a national emergency and called for mobilization of Defence forces against the "imperialist aggression".

The air strikes follow months of military buildup under 'Operation Southern Spear' by the US which had positioned an armada of warships in the Caribbean. The US justified the air strikes as part of a campaign against drug trafficking, accusing Maduro of leading a "narco-terrorist" organization--the Cartel of the Suns.

However, Maduro had in an interview on Friday dismissed the allegations and compared them with false justification for armed aggression. "Since they can't accuse us of having nuclear missiles, they invented an accusation that the United States knows is completely false..."

Maduro has also assured that Venezuela is prepared to receive US investment and supply oil under flexible conditions. He had also affirmed that his Government is willing to establish diplomatic agreements if US acts rationally.

The US allegations against Maduro have a striking parallel with the 1989 invasion of another Latin American country, Panama, to depose its leader Manuel Antonio Noriega. In both cases the US, to justify its military action, accused the Latin American leader of heading a narco-State.

The Venezuela attack is clearly a replay of the 1989 attack on Panama on similar grounds of the leader being allegedly involved in narco-terrorism.

A comparison between Panama's Noriega (1989) and Venezuela's Maduro (2026): Noriega--US allegation: working with the Medellín Cartel. Maduro-- Leading the Cartel of the Suns

U.S. Bounty on Noriega was 1 million USD and on Maduro 50 million USD.

Military Action against Noriega was called "Operation Just Cause" (Invasion) "Operation Southern Spear" (military strikes) on Maduro.

Earlier in October 2025 US had shot down negotiations mediated by Qatar after Venezuela's proposals for a transition were rejected. The US had intensified naval blockade and seized tankers that were transporting sanctioned Venezuelan oil.

The US alleges that Maduro leads 'Cártel de los Soles', a group of Venezuelan officials who allegedly use cocaine as a "weapon" to flood the US. The US has seized over 700 million USD in assets and documented nearly 7 tons of cocaine directly linked to Maduro's inner circle. Venezuelan government describe the allegations as "imperialist inventions" designed to facilitate regime change.

An assessment by the National Intelligence Council of the US had in 2025 concluded that there was no evidence of direct coordination between senior Maduro leaders and the notorious Tren de Aragua gang, contradicting Trump Administration's claims. The real story behind US actions in Venezuela seems strategic goals rather than a single motive. While drug trafficking is the most cited reason, they are part of a broader "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at forced regime change and exercising US influence in the Western Hemisphere.

The main aim seemed removal of Maduro government to install a U.S.-friendly administration.

Removing Maduro is also seen as a way to weaken the influence of Russia, China and Iran in Latin America-Venezuela's economic and military allies.

It is also aimed at controlling Oil and Minerals. Venezuela holds the world's largest proven oil reserves--an estimated 303–304 billion barrels of oil, more than any other nation, including Saudi Arabia.

The "Narco-Terrorism" narrative is just a façade.

Middle Eastern, Asian nations urge Israel to lift Gaza aid restrictions amid harsh winter

Middle Eastern and Asian nations have urged Israel to permit "immediate, full, and unhindered" humanitarian aid to reach the Gaza Strip, which is facing harsh winter storms lashing the Palestinian enclave, Al Jazeera reported.

In a statement on Friday, the foreign ministers of Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan warned that worsening conditions in Gaza have left nearly 1.9 million displaced Palestinians extremely vulnerable.

"Flooded camps, damaged tents, the collapse of damaged buildings, and exposure to cold temperatures coupled with malnutrition, have significantly heightened risks to civilian lives," the statement read.

They urged the international community to "press Israel, as the occupying power, to immediately remove restrictions on the entry and distribution of essential items, including tents, shelter materials, medical aid, clean water, fuel, and sanitation supplies," Al Jazeera reported.

Despite its obligations under international law to meet the basic needs of Palestinians in Gaza, Israel has continued to impose strict limits on humanitarian assistance, Al Jazeera reported.

Under a ceasefire mediated by the United States that began in October between Israel and Hamas, Israeli authorities were required to allow hundreds of aid trucks into Gaza each day.

However, Israel has not complied with this condition, continuing to block aid deliveries even as winter conditions worsen and access to adequate shelter, blankets, and other necessities remains insufficient in the territory.

Several Palestinian families have been forced to take shelter in temporary structures and overcrowded tent camps across Gaza after their homes were destroyed in Israel's ongoing military campaign, Al Jazeera reported.

In recent weeks, several people have died when weakened buildings collapsed due to heavy rain and flooding. Children in the enclave have also succumbed to hypothermia as freezing temperatures persist.

Separately, Israeli forces killed one Palestinian and injured several others on Friday in an area west of Khan Younis in southern Gaza, Nasser Hospital said, quoted by Al Jazeera.

Displaced families appeal for shelter, aid as winter worsens in Kabul

As winter temperatures fall in Kabul, internally displaced families have appealed to authorities to urgently address their deteriorating living conditions, Tolo News reported. Hundreds of displaced families are currently living in tents in the Khairkhana Kotal area, spending both daytime and night hours exposed to harsh weather. The absence of proper housing, coupled with shortages of basic supplies, has made daily life increasingly difficult for them. Ismat, who was forced to leave his home and relocate to Kabul 14 years ago due to conflict, said prolonged economic hardship and the lack of employment opportunities have prevented him from building a permanent house.

He lives in tents with his ill mother and other family members. "I ask the government to give us land so we can build shelter. Life in tents is impossible," Ismat told Tolo News. Another displaced woman, Rana, said families are struggling to survive and are hoping for assistance during the winter months. "We hope to receive some food and other assistance so we can continue our lives," she said. Residents living in the tents said the cold has made conditions especially unbearable, with many unable to sleep at night. They called on Afghanistan's Islamic Emirate to give serious attention to the situation of internally displaced families and take concrete steps to resolve their problems, Tolo News reported. "In the cold, we cannot sleep in tents. What should we eat? What should we drink?" said a displaced woman, Shakila. Another displaced man, Rozgul, explained that families are resorting to unsafe measures to keep warm. "The coal you see is collected from streets and roads and burned for warmth," he said. Economic experts have cautioned that ignoring the situation of internally displaced families could result in serious social and economic consequences. Economic analyst Mir Shaker Yaqoubi said the government must act promptly as winter conditions worsen. "The government should understand the economic situation and respond this winter by providing shelter, food and cash assistance to displaced families," Yaqoubi said, according to Tolo News.

POEMS

Ode to Dalya's Bald Spot

my sister wraps the throw
around herself on the small
cream loveseat & I know
for sure that she is not
a speck of dirt on a pill.
she coughs & sniffs up all
the lucky air in the room
into her excellent nostrils,
which are endless
holy wells replenishing
the soft architecture of her guts.
not even the lupus can interrupt
this ritual of beholding.
you ever look at a thing
you ain't make, but become
a mother in the looking?
our blood is a thread tied
around my finger, tied
around her finger, that helps
me love. when her knees
swell, when her joints rust,
when her hair thins & flees
making a small continent
of skin on the side of her head,
i am witnessing her in whatever
state her body will allow.
Bismillah to the brain that
put my name next to her name
and said look at this girl your
whole life and know some kind
of peace. littlest bald spot, that no one
expected or knew how to love
you remind me of us.

By Angel Nafis

Swiss bar fire in Crans-Montana likely caused by champagne sparklers: Officials

Sparklers attached to champagne bottles and held too close to the ceiling likely sparked the deadly fire at the "Le Constellation" bar in Crans-Montana, Switzerland, during a New Year's party, killing at least 40 people, CNN quoted officials as saying.

The blaze reportedly spread rapidly due to a flashover, and Swiss prosecutors have opened an investigation into possible criminal responsibility.

Earlier, at a press conference in Crans-Montana, Valais Cantonal Police Commander Frederic Gisler said authorities responded swiftly after a fire was reported at a bar in the area.

According to Gisler, smoke was first seen coming from the bar in the centre of the Swiss ski resort at around 1:30 am. Moments later, a witness contacted the emergency call centre to report the incident. A red alert was immediately issued to mobilise firefighting services, he added.

The first teams from the Crans-Montana intercommunal police and the gendarmerie reached the scene at 1:32 am, and were soon joined by additional emergency responders, CNN reported.

"Their initial assignment was obviously to take care of the victims, to provide them emergency help," Gisler said. He noted that firefighters managed to extinguish the blaze quickly. "Following that, the initial investigations were able to start," he said.

Reception centres were later set up to assist those affected by the incident, and a helpline was launched at 4:14 am to provide information and support to families.

"All of the injured people had received care by shortly after 5 am, thanks to this widescale mobilisation," CNN quoted Gisler as saying.

Families of those who lost their lives in the fire at Crans-Montana are facing a painful wait, as local authorities said it could take several days to identify all of the approximately 40 victims, CNN reported.

"Currently and in the days to come, the priority will be identifying the people who have died so that their bodies can be returned quickly to their families," Gisler said in a press